

Tristram

with love from

Daddy.

(J. D. Brewster)

Ickleford Reday

4.18.29

THE MEETING PLACE

AND OTHER STORIES

BY THE SAME AUTHOR



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THE MEETING PLACE

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

J. D. BERESFORD

LONDON

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THE MEETING PLACE



I

MICHAEL STEVENS had started life as a clerk in a big City office. He had always hated his work there. He was naturally shy and very reserved; and he had nothing in common with his fellow-clerks, who thought him a 'poor sort of fool'. He did not drink or bet or swear or play billiards; and he blushed and became horribly embarrassed when Jones, who worked on his right gave Sinclair, who worked on his left, the story of his latest conquest; even if it were so harmless an achievement as kissing a girl at a dance, which by Jones's own account amounted almost to a habit with him.

Michael was known by the men in the office as 'the Mug'. He did not resent the nick-name. In his heart he sometimes acknowledged to himself that he was a mug. That acknowledgment, however, was only made in the blank, terrible moments when his dreams failed him; and he had such a wonderful gift for dreaming that these blank moments were comparatively rare.

Outwardly, he was a shy young man, with a good forehead, a slightly elfish face, and watchful, timid eyes. Inwardly, in his mind, he was a strange mixture of a Galahad and a Hector; and did the most magnificent things in an immense number of different ways; different, but always, ultimately, splendid.

He was twenty-nine when he started to put one of

his dreams on paper. At first, even in the solitude of his own room, he was a little self-conscious, and blushed at his own daring. But he very soon got over that, and then this new method of dreaming began to fascinate him. He had never told anyone of his romantic imaginings, and he found it an immense relief to write out the story of one of them—his favourite story of the man whom everyone regarded as a 'mug', but who was, in fact, a strange mixture of Hector and Sir Galahad. He revelled in the miseries and the triumphs of his protagonist; at times, he fairly wallowed in them. This putting of the story into written words was almost as good as living it in action.

The idea of publishing this story never occurred to him until, with an immense and really passionate regret, he realised that it was finished, for he had a strong sense of drama, and when his hero reached his climax, Michael had done with him. He had no interest in following him any further. Also, he wanted to begin another story, now; not quite so near his heart, but very fascinating all the same.

And then, the great impelling Fate that had prompted him to write, appeared to tackle the far harder task of getting him to publish. That bizarre, almost incredible notion would come into his mind at all kinds of unlikely moments, and sometimes in the office, Sinclair would ask him what the devil he was smiling at. Even Sinclair must have been an agent of Fate, for he stirred Michael to play with the exquisite dream of leaving the office and Sinclair's society for ever; and what hope was there of doing that unless—foolish and impossible dream—he published his story and it was a success. He knew that some real authors made quite a lot of money.

Finally, he undertook the first steps towards publication under shelter of the fantasy that it was a sort of game he was playing. He took immense pains to hide his own identity. He called himself for this purpose, Stephen Montrose, and his nearest approach to making a confidant, was the giving of this name to his tobacconist, to whose care, he had decided, all correspondence in this connection, must be addressed. He had known this tobacconist for seven years, and had been to his shop with unfailing regularity twice a week. The tobacconist thought of him always as 'the quiet gentleman'; and that was all he knew about him; as once the nature of his invariable purchase had been learnt, Michael's conversation had been entirely confined to two 'good-evenings', one on entering the shop, and the other on leaving it.

He had to brace himself to ask if he might have an occasional letter and parcel addressed there.

The tobacconist who was, himself, of a markedly reticent disposition replied simply, 'What name?'

'Stephen Montrose,' Michael said, and blushed with shame at the deception he was practising.

He sent his MS., not without great misgivings to a well-known bureau to be typed. He chose a big office, because his experience had taught him that his sacred story would be treated there merely as one business proposition among many. Nevertheless, as he opened the bulky parcel he had picked up at the tobacconist's on his way home, he wondered if the girl who had typed it might not have been stirred to mark her approval, or disapproval, in some way? He made quite a touching little story out of that idea while

he was patiently untying the string. He never cut knots; he preferred to untie them.

But the young woman who had typed his story had not, apparently, been moved to write to him. The only communication from the bureau that he found, was a quite impersonal but rather terrifying account for eight pounds. It was not until he had gone through nearly a hundred pages of the typescript that he found a message from the first reader of *The Evergreen Oak*.

The message was at the bottom of the page, and consisted of a slight crinkling of the paper. Michael knew that mark very well. Before he had sent his MS. to be typed, he had spent two laborious evenings rewriting the pages that had been disfigured by his own tears. He could not help it, though he was bitterly ashamed of his weakness. But when he found these indications of a sympathetic soul, his heart leaped with joy. There were five pages altogether that were thus exquisitely signed by the unknown typist; and he amended the story he had written in his mind while he untied the string, and imagined several better ones around the same theme. With each effort the typist became more and more beautiful, but always she was the twin soul who could at once understand and admire him. (She was, in actual fact, exceedingly plain and middle-aged, but it was true that she had a sympathetic soul.)

When the typing had been corrected, and many imaginary letters written to the first reader of *The Evergreen Oak*, Fate, which for some reason was doing all it could for Michael just then, induced him to buy a periodical, in which he found the advertisement of a literary agent. Michael had known nothing of literary

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agents before he found that advertisement, and the discovery solved the immediate problem which had been troubling him. For, deeply camouflaged as he was, he hated the thought of the curt refusal he expected to receive from a publisher. He knew that this first refusal—it would also be the last, for he would never send the book out again if it were once declined—would confirm, perhaps for ever, the terrors of those occasional blank moments in which he acknowledged to himself that Sinclair and Jones and the rest of the office staff were justified in calling him a mug. This discovery of the functions of a literary agent avoided all that difficulty. It was the agent's business to place manuscripts; and the word 'business' was associated in Michael's mind with all that was callous, inhuman and stereotyped. People engaged in business did not weep over stories, nor, on the other hand, trouble to despise them. To the agent, no doubt, this would be but one proposition among a hundred.

He received, by return, on a post-card, an acknowledgment from the agent; but as it was all printed except the name of the story and a hieroglyphic which represented the firm's signature, Michael got no help from that except the information that the firm would not hold itself responsible for 'the destruction of the MS. by fire or other causes'. After this post-card there was silence for a whole month—during which time expenses were running up; for Michael, naturally, called every day at the tobacconist's shop, and that meant an ounce of his usual tobacco on each occasion. He could not simply go in and ask if there were a letter or a parcel for him. Indeed, he never asked at all. He just looked up wistfully at the shelf on which the

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tobacconist kept the letters, and his silent friend behind the counter replied by shaking his head. (Michael made rather a charming little story out of the accumulation of superfluous ounce-packets of 'Navy Cut' he stored in his cupboard. Michael's world was full of stories.)

But one day the letter was there waiting for him; and it *was* a letter, not a parcel. Michael instantly realised the significance of that fact. The tobacconist had the letter all ready for him on the counter, and when Michael picked up the fateful missive, suddenly broke into speech.

'Ave they took it?' he asked.

Michael was, for a moment, completely flabbergasted.

'How . . .' he began, and left it at that.

'Well,' the tobacconist said, correctly inferring the remainder of the question; ' 'twasn't 'ard—what with the addresses and so on.' He paused after this elaborate effort before he concluded: 'Read a bit meself, off times.'

Michael blushed deeply and opened his letter. He was trembling slightly as he said: 'Yes, they've taken it. They want me to go and see them.'

'Ah!' replied the tobacconist sympathetically.

Michael shook hands with him, and the understanding was complete. It was a great moment.

The number of people who did not think Michael a mug, was increasing very rapidly. There were, now, the beautiful typist, the literary agent, the tobacconist and the firm of publishers who had accepted *The Evergreen Oak*.

And the interview with the agent was not so bad,

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because the agent did all the talking. He was a small, rubicund, cheerful man with a great gift for speech. Fate had chosen him to act for Michael, because he had two other recommendations which are not always found together. He was enterprising and scrupulously honest.

II

Michael was, no doubt, an exceptional individual. Successful authors often are. But his peculiarities were of an unusual kind, and the chief of them was that he had no idea of how to spend money. He hated going into shops, he hated display; he knew no one that he particularly wished to endow; he knew no one in whose company he cared to spend, say, a thoroughly expensive evening. If he had had a competence, which was all that he had desired, he might have been comparatively happy, living obscurely and telling himself stories. Unfortunately, once *The Evergreen Oak* had begun to sell, it had gathered momentum in a way that was almost incredible. The first trickle of royalties that had enabled him (silently and without any admission of what he had done or who he so wonderfully was), to leave for ever the office and the society of Sinclair and Jones, had become a bountiful stream six months later, and then a vast, uncontrollable torrent of a river. And month by month, now, this terrible problem of what he was going to do with his money, with himself, with life, became more and more urgent.

In the September that would register, he hoped, the climax of *The Evergreen Oak's* popularity (although, as a matter of fact that climax was not reached for still another six months), he had fled from his Welsh retreat

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among the hills to a quiet and remote little town on the Mediterranean, in the South of France. He had gone partly to avoid his publisher's advertisements, and partly to escape the growing curiosity as to who he was, where he lived and how he spent his time. It seemed that his book was so great a success that all the newspapers and periodicals were eager to give the author of it free advertisement. Presently his publisher took advantage of that eagerness, without Michael's help.

But now that he was established with a sitting-room and a bedroom in the second-best hotel at Ste. Maxime-sur-Mer, (he chose the second-best, because he learnt that in the season which was not yet, quite a number of English and Americans came to the first-best), he was as far as ever from solving his personal problem. Even in the matter of spending money, he was hopelessly behind his reasonable possibilities. Only by making an effort could he get his expenses up to £500 a year at Ste. Maxime. He might as well have tried to drain a great river with a garden hose.

And then, there was another thing that dispirited him. He had conceived an ambition to write in the manner of what he called 'a real author', such as Henry James, George Meredith, Walter Pater, Emerson, or even, say, that charming essayist and poet who had published three volumes under the name of Janet Hardinge. And the thing, as he was beginning miserably to acknowledge to himself, was clean beyond him. He had written another novel, in the manner of his first, a worthy successor as he shamefacedly admitted in his moments of reaction; and quite a number of short stories; but none of these had even been typed.

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What was the good? They could hardly add to his reputation, such as it was; and the only effect would be to deepen that already unmanageable flood. But 'literature', the real thing, that he admired so profoundly, was outside his productive scope.

He could have been so happy in this lovely country, if he had not been continually worried by the thought of his own ineptitude! Yet, in some way, he was aware that his discontent was a good sign. Without it, there was no alternative but to accept the disgraceful nickname bestowed upon him by Sinclair and Jones. In his dream, he was so often Hector, the man of action. Surely there must be, in his own phrase, some meeting-place between life and dreams!

He was in one of his most despondent moods, when he climbed up through the forest of pine and ilex, one gorgeous October afternoon towards that favourite seat of his, from which he could look down at the wonderful panorama of blue sea and purple hills that lay spread out below him. It was a view that had often had a calming effect upon his mind, but to-day he was so deep in the contemplation of his problem that he was within a few feet of his goal before he realised, with a start of surprise and embarrassment, that his favourite seat was already occupied—yes, quite surprisingly and embarrassingly occupied.

She was a youngish woman—twenty-seven or eight, perhaps—certainly beautiful and well-dressed. But that, confusing as it undoubtedly was, was not nearly so alarming as her attitude and expression. For she was sitting, rigidly, curiously still; as if she were frozen with terror at his appearance. And her blue, remarkably blue and lovely, eyes were fixed upon him with an

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expression which seemed to combine the intensest horror with a kind of mute appeal.

Michael could only infer that he was not wanted. He was about to turn away, when he saw the woman's fine eyebrows contract slightly with an expression that had a distinct tinge of impatience. Then, as it were, tentatively and with great caution, her lips moved.

'My shoulder,' she said in a low, even voice. 'My left shoulder. Look.'

He looked and saw—not precisely on her shoulder, but between that and her throat, where the delicate, faintly sun-browned skin was revealed by the low neck of her grey linen dress—the cause of her terror: a hornet, a terrible, malignant beast of a hornet, coolly standing on that tender flesh and attending to its own affairs with the air of a brutal tyrant who defies all interference.

The whole of Michael's mind and energy seemed to be instantly concentrated to the point of action. He forgot, for once, to think; but tensing his middle finger fiercely against the ball of his restraining thumb, he approached, steadily and as rapidly as he dared, the malevolent brute that arrogantly occupied so lovely a throne. The beast saw him before he reached it, and turning slightly, faced him, raising itself on its front pair of legs and lifting the repulsive mask of its fierce head.

The woman delicately clenched her teeth and shut her eyes. She was very pale.

But Michael made no mistake. The powerful flick of his released middle finger was delivered rapidly and with perfect accuracy. The body of the hornet soared through the air and fell ten feet away. And Michael

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followed it at once and with his heel completed the work so cleverly begun. The elation of victory carried him back to the woman under the ilex before he realised just what he might be letting himself in for. He had not, for all intents and purposes, ever before been alone with a young and beautiful woman.

She had opened her eyes and was pressing a slip of cambric handkerchief to her mouth.

'Oh! thank you ever so much,' she said from behind this cover, revealing the English origin he had not before had time to guess. 'And you did it *so* cleverly. I'm a perfect fool of course. I'm afraid I still feel rather sick. But they are such evil-looking, malicious brutes, aren't they?' She dropped the handkerchief into her lap, breathed deeply and looked at him for the first time with a touch of interest and curiosity before she added: 'I really don't know what I should have done if you hadn't turned up. Fainted, probably.'

'Beastly thing to happen, perfectly beastly,' Michael murmured. He could think of nothing else to say.

'I've never seen one here before, have you?' the woman went on, 'and I've had a villa here for three years, and spent at least six months out of the twelve in it. Do you suppose there's a nest somewhere about?' and as she looked around her, a faint suggestion of terror returned to the dilating pupils of her remarkably blue and very expressive eyes.

'Not near here,' Michael said. 'At least, not very near. Half a mile, perhaps. I saw it the other day. I—I sort of tracked it. Saw them about, you know, and watched where they went.' His just perceptible blush was not for his actual words, but for the memory of the very Hectorish story that had prompted his

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tracking. Had he not, a few days ago, delivered a fair lady, who might very well have represented the first rough sketch of the one to whom he was now (miraculously) speaking, from a whole nest of violently enraged hornets, at the imminent risk of his own life?

‘But aren’t you afraid of them?’ the lady asked with an open-eyed wonder. ‘They are really dangerous, you know.’

Michael pondered that for a moment. He was very anxious to tell the exact truth; the only escape from his two pitfalls of a romantic exaggeration on the one hand, and an equally false humility on the other.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, at last, with a great seriousness. ‘I hadn’t actually thought about it.’

The lady smiled, but it was not at all an unkind smile; it had in it nothing of that supercilious quality with which Sinclair used to regard Michael’s attempts to tell the exact truth.

‘Won’t you sit down?’ she said.

Michael realised that the crisis he had dimly foreseen was now upon him; and he was not so much in two minds about it as in twenty. He felt, for instance, the appeal of the delicate attitude; of abstaining to thrust himself upon this unprotected beauty whom he had surprised alone in the forest. In this story, the proper thing to do was to excuse himself courteously, and leave her, with just a hint showing of the silent hero. Or, there was the rather splendid rôle of the man of the world; delicate and reticent again, but with the Galahad hidden under another guise. Or—the thing that tempted him—he might just shake his head silently and go, leaving her to do the story telling herself. She might so easily find half-a-dozen romantic explanations.

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(He could.) And then there was Hector, that wonderful, incredible creature, who did such magnificent, compelling things! But he knew the part of Hector was beyond him just at the moment. Finally, omitting a dozen other fine shades, heroic or tender, of conducting the affair, there remained his own personal, intimidating problem. Was not this a chance—admirably well opened by the killing of the hornet—to be a reasonable human being and not a romantically-minded, impossible mug?

‘Won’t you sit down?’ the lady repeated, still smiling.

‘I was thinking,’ Michael admitted, and induced himself to sit down.

‘So I guessed,’ the lady said. ‘Of hornets?’

‘In a way,’ Michael returned.

She encouraged him with a friendly, questioning lift of her fine eyebrows.

‘You see,’ Michael began, wishing that he could find another beginning for his sentences—the characters in his novels never said ‘you see’. ‘In a way, I rather admire hornets. They are so brave and so sure of themselves. That chap on your shoulder was quite keen to fight me. He sort of squared at me, you know. They simply don’t care a curse for anybody. . . .’

‘Oh! don’t I know?’ the lady interrupted him, her face grown suddenly hard and resentful. ‘They believe they’re the lords of creation, and that everyone must give way to them. And nothing will ever teach them that they’re not the only important things in the universe. They’re ready to bully anyone; they think no one can resist them.’ She paused a moment before she added, ‘And you really admire that sort of character, do you? The arrogant, hectoring, brutal sort?’

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'Only their courage,' Michael apologised.

'Courage! There's no courage about it,' the lady replied contemptuously. 'It's sheer, beastly ignorance, that's all.'

'I hadn't thought of it like that,' Michael confessed.

'Now *you were* brave,' the lady began, but Michael could not stand that.

'No, no. I wasn't. Really, I wasn't,' he said very earnestly. 'I simply acted without thinking, on the spur of the moment. And,' he suppressed his 'you see' just in time, 'it's the easiest thing in the world to get the better of a hornet, just because it is so—so bold, and so ignorant.' He dared to raise his eyes for an instant, and was surprised to find that the beautiful lady looked a trifle abashed.

'Perhaps it is,' she said, more humbly, and with a faint sigh. And then: 'Are you staying here, for long?'

'I expect so,' Michael said.

'Have you got a villa?' she asked.

'No. I'm staying at the Hotel de la Plage.' Michael thought that he was really carrying off this difficult conversation rather well. 'It's not much of a place, but quiet.'

'Yes, I daresay it is quiet,' she admitted, without enthusiasm.

'I like quiet places,' Michael said.

She looked at him with a faintly-amused smile.

'Was that why you came up here this afternoon?' she asked.

He nodded. 'I often come,' he said.

'And sit under this tree?'

'Generally.'

'I feel that I ought to apologise,' the lady said, gazing

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out over the sea. 'But I've so often sat here, myself . . .'

Michael, who had been congratulating himself on the ease of his conversation, awoke to the fact that he had been rather rude.

'But you know I didn't mean that?' he gasped, getting very red. 'I only meant. . . '

She thought that she had never met anyone who was quite so transparently honest, and so—what was the word? Simple? Ingenuous? Or should it be, perhaps, genuine?

Her smile had a very friendly quality as she cut short his attempted explanation by saying: 'Of course, I knew what you meant, perfectly well.' She got up as she spoke, and then added: 'Are you going to stay here and bathe in the view or will you come down the hill with me, in case there should be other stray hornets about? Candidly, I don't think that I can ever sit under that tree again.'

Michael, with a feeling that he was really achieving the part of Hector at last, accompanied her down the hill. On the way they talked of *Ste. Maxime* and the neighbourhood, but after they had come to the main road, and he had, with a quick reversion to the *Galahad* rôle, suggested that their ways now lay in opposite directions, (he was so afraid of appearing to thrust his society upon her); she added, after accepting the reasonableness of their present parting:

'And do you ever go to the market in the morning? It's such fun. I go every morning about nine, and try to talk *Provençal*. And thank you again so much for saving my life.'

It was wonderful; it was incredible; but Michael, pondering that saying as he walked home, could only

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draw the really impossible inference that she would not mind seeing him again.

He almost forgot to dream, the reality was so enchanting, until Mme. Imbert, the proprietress of his hotel, gave him a new and terrifying instance of the fact that all realities have sharp and unexpected edges; whereas dreams. . . .

Mme. Imbert came and talked to him every evening, either after his dinner or while he was still eating it. It is true that he deserved this honour in his quality of a distinguished guest, but she had, also, another reason. For the first time in her experience she had found the perfect listener, a unique creature whom she had always desired to meet.

This evening she was full of news; and Michael presently began to disentangle from her *mélange* of gesture, exclamation and narrative, the history of a woman who was, beyond all question, the beautiful lady of his afternoon's adventure. Mme. Imbert knew everything of the lady's past: how she had been married very young to a 'wicked English milord'; how she had suffered; how three years ago there had been a divorce to permit the contemptible husband to remarry an equally contemptible English actress; how the ill-used lady now spent all her winters at Ste. Maxime, and had arrived there only the evening before; how . . .

But Michael, though he maintained his air of polite interest, missed many, probably inessential, details. He was dreaming again, relating what he had heard to his lady's detestation of the hornet's attitude towards life; and rather hopefully congratulating himself that whatever he might be, he was not the least like a hornet;

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when Mme. Imbert caught his attention again by saying that the misused lady had returned to the use of her maiden name, and ceased to wear a wedding ring. And that that name was Jane Hardinge. He recognised it with a start of surprise, even in its French guise.

For the first time, Michael interrupted Madame in the middle of a chapter. 'But—Jane Hardinge!' he repeated, 'Is she, then, a writer?'

It appeared that Madame was just coming to that aspect of the subject. . . .

So it was that Michael, alone in his own rather uncomfortable sitting-room, found himself for once, fairly confronted with the starkly intimidating world of reality. He had actually met and spoken with Jane Hardinge; the writer of that delicate verse and those equally delicate essays; whose name in the past two years, had become familiar to everyone who cared for the best in literature, the kind of literature that Michael, himself, would never be able to produce. And he had not only met her, he had rescued her from a hornet, and thereafter talked to her as if she and he were two ordinary human beings; whereas the truth was that she lived in another world, altogether; a world of letters in which *The Evergreen Oak* would be the subject of contempt and laughter. Oh! he knew.

Nevertheless, he would see her just once more; and since he admired before all things honesty and sincerity, he would confess his shame and allow her (metaphorically) to spit upon him. After that, he would go away for ever to Canada, South Africa, Australia or New Zealand; take a farm; work on it and learn to be a real man.

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IV

He was very nervous as he made his way down to the market at nine o'clock the next morning, but he did not falter; he did not even attempt to delude himself with any imaginative rendering of the thing he was about to do. He had, he told himself, given up dreaming for ever, and there and then bravely resisted the temptation to weave a story out of so fascinating a theme. And when he caught sight, quite a long way off, of a graceful figure in a linen dress, cut just as the dress of yesterday, but this one was dark green, he clenched his teeth and his hands and went straight on.

He stood for a moment or two watching her in the half-shade of the market before she saw him; steeping himself in the beauty of the whole scene; the bright colours and texture of the vegetables; the dark dresses and brown, lined faces of the market women; the flash of a scarlet handkerchief; all seen so vividly in the flicker of mellow sunlight that lighted the shadow of the plane-trees to the living green of deep clear water; and all so picturesque and appropriate a setting for that one figure moving so vivaciously from stall to stall, and—Michael felt that with a sudden glow of sympathy and understanding—weaving dreams out of these gay threads of Southern life. Oh! yes, she must be aware of the peasant's admiration for the beautiful English-woman. They made no effort to disguise it.

She started and flushed slightly as she caught sight of him standing there with his head a little bent, and that look of deep, yet in some way detached, speculation on his elfin face. But there was no hint of embarrassment or displeasure in the gay wave of her hand, nor as

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he came towards her, in her greeting of him as 'Perseus'.

'But there's another rôle for you this morning,' she went on, without giving him time to disclaim the title; 'you can carry my baskets for me. I always come out meaning to buy hardly anything, and always I buy more than I can conveniently carry. And there's still the bread to get.'

Michael accepted the baskets as if he had come there for no other purpose.

And while they were in the market, visiting the baker and passing back through the little town, she continued to keep up a light froth of chatter, in English to him, in French, which had, indeed, a strong savour of patois, to the market-women and the baker's wife. But when they were alone together on the road that ran along the sea's edge, returning to her villa, she turned to him with a new seriousness and asked:

'Tell me what you were brooding over so earnestly, when I first caught sight of you in the market?'

'The difference between one's life and one's dreams,' Michael replied on the spur of the moment; 'and the meeting-place.'

'What a beautiful text for an essay!' she murmured, looking away from him out over the sea.

'For you,' he said.

She turned round sharply. 'You knew me, then?' she asked.

'Not yesterday,' he amended. 'Mme. Imbert, my landlady, began to talk about you last night, after dinner. She talks to me every night.'

'I know the old gossip,' Jane Hardinge replied a little vindictively. 'And I don't suppose she was content to give you only my name?'

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'No; but I wasn't listening half the time. I don't,' Michael explained.

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I've nothing to hide,' she said.

'You see,' Michael began, unable this time to avoid that opening, and hurrying on to cover his nervousness, 'I've always admired your books so, and when she told me who you were . . .'

'Don't,' Jane Hardinge implored him.

Michael winced.

'You see,' she went on quickly, realising his sensitiveness and sympathetically adopting his favourite introduction to speech; 'I have had so much of it. Of course, one always likes to feel that people admire one's books; but well, personally, I'd sooner they didn't tell me so. I don't know why, but it always makes me feel unreal. I'm detestably vain, I'm afraid; and the things people say are always so—unsatisfying. They can't help it. I say the same things myself, to my friends. Even in the letters one gets. . . .'

'I suppose you get a heap of letters?' Michael put in.

'No, not a heap. Quite a few, really,' she said. 'But nearly all of them from the wrong people. Oh! well, you can guess, now, why I said "Don't". And aren't you fairly fainting under the load of my baskets?'

'I'd forgotten that I was carrying them,' Michael replied truthfully.

She looked up at him—he was tall and slight, nearly a head taller than she was—as if she suspected him of trying to force a compliment, but the wistful earnestness of his face dispelled that illusion. The phrase with which he had begun this conversation, recurred to her:

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'the meeting-place of life and dreams'. She was not quite sure that she, herself, had found it. But had he?

'Well, here we are at my very door,' she said. 'And thank you so much for saving me a second time from disaster.'

Michael gravely lifted his hat and bowed.

'And won't you . . .' she began and hesitated. She was a little confused; she, Jane, who had learnt the arts of aplomb and self-possession in such a hard school. But this man was so strangely different from all the men she had known, so much simpler, more sincere; and—the quality in him that was confusing her at this moment—so unassuming. If she wished to see more of him—and she did—she would have to take all the initiative. And it had come to her with a sudden twinge of embarrassment that already she had been rather too bold.

Michael was wistfully waiting for the completion of her sentence.

Jane decided that on this occasion she would overcome her scruples and risk the appearance of being too 'forward'. It was quite certain, in any case, that he would not take advantage of it.

'And won't you,' she repeated; 'come and be rewarded by some real English tea at half-past four?'

She thought that Michael's acceptance of that invitation, though quite definite, was a little lacking in enthusiasm. Probably, she rather bored him. He could not be expected to understand that that bright, quick manner and speech of hers had been adopted as a defence against the world.

The truth was that Michael, as he made the appointment, had been all too conscious of his vow to make

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confession at the earliest possible moment. 'This afternoon,' he had reflected, 'she will have to know that I'm nothing but the teller of impossible dream-stories.' There really had been no opportunity to tell her that morning.

And it fell out that neither did she learn the fact that afternoon. She was a little on the defensive, and their talk, though abundant (Jane, of course, did most of it), was never intimate enough to give him an opening. Once or twice, he had some kind of opportunity to begin his piece of self-revelation, but on each occasion it entailed an inappropriate opening, and before he had had time to screw up his courage to the pitch of confession, June had started again. So their talk was confined to the country round about, to which Jane was an interesting and amusing guide-book; and to Mme. Imbert, and the market-women, with just a few casual references here and there to literature; references that blew up and died down again without ever becoming the least personal.

And, going home, Michael decided that there was plenty of time; and that perhaps his confession was not, after all, quite so important, as he had thought. It was exceedingly unlikely that she took, or would ever take, any real interest in him. Also, he decided that there was to be no dreaming, no romantic story-telling on this subject. She was not a woman, she was a goddess; his worship of her was a religion; and religion was the most real thing in the world. . . .

They did not meet in the market, the following morning, because Michael, feeling that it would be too obvious to go and seek her there, stayed miserably indoors in his private sitting-room; while Jane, who

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had counted on him, had to pay a small boy to carry her baskets home for her. And when they did meet, more or less by accident, on the plage that afternoon, her manner was cooler than it had yet been. She had decided that there was a limit to the amount of initiative a woman can decently take in this connection.

And the next day, he did not see her at all, though he tried the plage again in the afternoon, and even wandered up the sea's edge to within a hundred yards of her villa.

And that night, Michael made the great renunciation. He resolved to go away, quietly, without a word of farewell. That was the kind of thing he could do best. In the morning, however, he realised that his plan of renunciation was nothing but a piece of cowardice; and, making a great effort, he went out early and met her on the coast-road.

'I thought,' he explained, 'that, being Saturday, you might have rather a lot to carry.'

She seemed quite pleased to see him, although there was, it appeared later, very little to carry; as on Saturday, she gave her weekly order at the Epicerie, and had the things sent up. Their conversation, however, was a little forced, as if they were both—even Michael was almost talkative—anxious to avoid anything like those ominous silences which are sometimes the prelude to a sudden falling into serious and personal topics. Yet just at the last, when they were within sight of the villa, she gave him the least suggestion of a hint which Michael, for all his diffidence, was ready to accept at its real, as opposed to its face, value.

'Don't you hate carrying things?' she asked. 'I do.'

'I love it,' Michael said, and knew that, in future,

his appearance at the market would never be regarded as unwelcome.

They stuck at that development for a whole week; without making any progress towards an understanding, and without any confession on the part of Michael. They talked of outside things, never of themselves. And Michael put off the evil day when she must know all, and was content. Jane was not. Her curiosity was aroused. She wondered who he was, and what he did, and why he was spending the winter in the South of France, with no visible occupation or object. So, reflecting that she had behaved quite modestly and becomingly for seven whole days, and that if the initiative were left to him they might continue on their present terms, until one or other of them went back to London in the Spring, she boldly invited him to go with her up into the forest to collect fir-cones.

‘I know they are very cheap to buy,’ she explained; ‘but it’s so nice to gather riches direct from nature, isn’t it? Almost as if one were earning one’s own living? And I’m quite dependent on fir-cones to heat the geyser for my bath. So I thought as you’re fond of carrying things . . .’

Michael would have carried a whole fir tree for her if she had asked him.

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They filled the two baskets, and the string bag—Jane was going to carry, too—in under ten minutes.

‘It’s almost too easy, isn’t it?’ she asked. ‘However, we can now sit down for a bit, and pretend that we have gathered great wealth at infinite risk and have still to

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face the perils of getting it safely home. Don't you tell yourself stories like that, sometimes?'

'Too much,' Michael said. 'But I didn't think that you did—except perhaps once, when I was watching you in the market. . . .'

Jane blushed. 'It's quite true,' she admitted. 'I do play up to their admiration. But,' she shrugged her shoulders, 'one may as well make the most of life, such as it is.'

'But *your* life. . . .' Michael protested, and left his tone to express his opinion of her life's achievement, its richness and fulness.

She laughed. 'It isn't,' she said; hesitated as if she were on the verge of explaining what her life all too obviously lacked, and then continued, 'Is yours?'

'Mine,' Michael sighed, 'is only a dream.'

She smiled and lifted her eyebrows.

'A froth of dreams,' he said firmly. She had to know. It was not honest to keep up this pretence of being a man, any longer.

'Why don't you write them?' she asked. 'That's what dreams are for. But perhaps you do?'

Michael looked at her, piteously. He realised that his time had come, and he meant to face his confession bravely; but oh! it was bitter to think that this might be the last time she would smile on him. 'I have,' he said, desperately. 'Oh! I have.'

She leaned forward eagerly. 'Oh! but that's really interesting,' she exclaimed. 'Mayn't I see some of them, the written dreams? I might, perhaps, be able to help you. I have a little pull with my own publisher. He believes in me, though I don't help to make him rich. He says that my books give tone to his list! Like

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a touch of onion in the salad, I suppose. Perhaps you've heard of them? Braithwaite's? They're very well known.'

Had he heard of Braithwaite's? And oh! the pathos, the terrible pathos, of her suggestion that she might give him an introduction to them! She was increasing ten-fold the difficulty of his confession. He bowed his head and set his teeth.

'I should like to tell you. . . .' he began.

'I know. I know how difficult it is,' Jane interrupted, with the kindly intention of helping him with that, to her, familiar diffidence of the sensitive young author. 'It's like being a young mother, isn't it? One is inwardly, so proud, and yet so sure, that other people can never understand all the inward beauties of the wonderful infant. And to trust it into another's person's hands . . .! But, really, you needn't be afraid with me. I've been through it, myself. . . .'

'I should like to tell you, first,' Michael repeated firmly, 'just how it all began.'

'All?' murmured Jane. 'All? Do you mean . . .'

'For twelve years, I worked in a City office,' Michael said, determined that she should, at least, know what his temptation had been before she heard the damning truth. 'I was known there as "the Mug". I deserved the name. I do, still. They despised me and I hated them—all the other clerks and managers. I lived on my dreams. They have been all my life—up to now. And then, one evening, I began to try and write one—just for my own amusement. It never once occurred to me until I had finished it that anyone else would ever see it. But, when it was finished, I began to make another dream of it—of the book. I dreamed that it

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helped me to get away from the office—for good. So, like the fool I was, I sent it to a literary agent. And,’ he drooped his head still lower, in the objection of the shame that could no longer be concealed; ‘and he found a publisher for it.’

‘And those horrible critics . . .?’ Jane suggested. She was passionately sorry for him, but she believed that it would be best for him to relieve himself, now, and to her, of all his grievances and humiliations.

Michael made no reply.

‘But even if that first book were, in some sort of way, a failure . . .’ she said bravely.

Michael stared down between his knees at the pine-needles.

‘It wasn’t a failure,’ he said in a low voice. ‘It was a success; a vast, incredible success from the publisher’s point of view.’

For a whole long minute, perhaps, there was an intense silence, in which Michael, still sitting with bowed head, became aware as if he had suddenly awakened from sleep of the multitudinous murmuring of insects in the wood. Then he heard Jane ask, in a strangely remote, puzzled voice, ‘What was it called?’

He tried to articulate the name and failed.

‘I didn’t hear,’ she said, impatiently.

He cleared his throat and tried again. ‘You are, in a way,’ he murmured, ‘sitting under it, now.’

Jane looked up at the ilex. ‘You don’t mean . . .?’ Not the . . . *The Evergreen Oak*,’ she concluded, at last, in an awed whisper.

Michael did not answer that. He sat with his head still bowed, awaiting judgment. And again he heard

the roar of the insects swell up over the broken barrier of human speech.

Jane's voice (what an exquisitely clear, delicate voice it was! He had never properly appreciated it before!) returned, after what seemed to him an immense interval of patiently endured, motionless waiting, with an effect of curious detachment. It was as if she were speaking to some unseen audience rather than to himself.

'I suppose,' she began, very distinctly and coldly; 'that you never saw the report of that interview between me and a representative of *The Daily Express*?'

'Haven't seen an English paper for months,' Michael murmured, addressing the pine-needles.

'Then you probably wouldn't know,' Jane continued in the same impersonal tone; 'that there was a kind of mystery campaign this Autumn. No one, it appears, neither your agent nor your publisher knew anything about you. Who you were, what you did, or even your real name. Was that true, by the way?'

Michael nodded. 'I couldn't face them,' he said; 'not as the author. I pretended to be a—a sort of authorised agent. It was one of my disguises.'

'I might have known that you . . .' Jane began, then stopped, and reverting to her former detached voice, continued. 'You see, they, the papers I mean, started the idea that I had written the book under a pseudonym.'

Michael trembled at the thought of that insult, but remained silent. From the first, the luck had been all against him, it seemed.

'So, at last,' Jane went on, 'I consented to give an interview to *The Daily Express*. I'm—I'm sorry you didn't see it.'

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Strange, Michael thought, that she of all women could be so cruel. He looked up, then, expecting to find those blue eyes of hers fixed upon him with a cold, contemptuous stare, and was immensely surprised to find that her face was hidden in her hands.

‘I said,’ she began again, without moving her hands and with a slight tremor in her voice. ‘I said that I only wished I *had* written it. No, not because it was selling by the hundred thousand, but because it was, in its own way, a really great book! I—I told the reporter—that I—that it had—I said, quite honestly. . . . And it was true. I had; and I wasn’t ashamed of it. Why should one be? If a book can stir one’s emotions like that, there must be some eternal, fundamental human appeal in it, and be hanged to all the little dried-up satirical critics. Mr. Braithwaite wrote and thanked me and asked if he might quote the interview in his advertisements. I said he might. And he has.’

She looked up and met his eyes.

‘Of course, I’m blushing,’ she said. ‘And I’m not ashamed of that, either.’

And a little later: ‘But don’t you realise that all the people who write are like you in that? To all of us, our dreams are a little more real than life.’

‘But they’re not. Not now,’ Michael protested. ‘Not now that I—we—have found the meeting-place between life and dreams.’

END OF PHIPSON



PHIPSON—the reference, of course, is to *the* Phipson, W.W.—went to Northern France in the winter of '25-'26, to escape the effects of his celebrity. Before the autumn of 1925 he was, as everyone knows, almost celebrated enough. 'Quite one of our most promising young men,' was the usual description of him in Hampstead and places where they read. But after the publication of *Deep Unto Deep* no more was said of 'promise'. He had achieved, had become a standard of reference, as the relativists say; one said of so-and-so that he had rather the Phipsonian manner.

It was the sudden excess of that kind of thing which drove Phipson to France. He was afraid that too much praise might spoil his work. Also he was getting a trifle bored with so much admiration. His admirers never seemed to know when they were repeating themselves and one another. He went to France because he had never been there before and had a romantic idea that it was populated by French people.

He chose Neuville-sur-Mer because it was so obvious. The Syndicat d'Initiative of Neuville-sur-Mer had recently conceived the brilliant idea of starting a winter season. One of the big hotels was to be kept open and the little Casino. Furthermore, there was the attraction of the celebrated Links, and they could safely advertise its 'famous climate' without having to explain what it was famous for. The

English papers were full of references to Neuville-sur-Mer that autumn.

That Phipson should go to Neuville was natural enough. What has never so far been explained is why he has never returned, *why he never will return*. It was like this.

He arrived at the Splendid Hotel, Neuville, at half-past six, and being tired and having forgotten most of the French phrases he had been learning on the journey, was relieved to find that not only the concierge but also all the waiters and attendants he met spoke English. But when he arrived in the crowded *salle-à-manger* at eight o'clock his relief gave place to exasperation at the discovery that so far as he could judge every man and woman of that crowd was simply and unequivocally British. For a moment he had a ghastly presentiment that the secret of his destination had leaked out and that he had been followed. But no one looked round as he came in, nor even glanced at him as the head waiter guided him to the dark and inconvenient corner in which a very small table had been reserved for him. For the moment he was safe, but he had faithfully registered his name, quality, and home address on entering the hotel, and his identity could not long be concealed. It was a nuisance. He was truly tired of being congratulated on the success of *Deep Unto Deep* and all his other works.

Nevertheless, he could not help listening to the very audible conversation at the neighbouring tables, dreading every moment to hear some reference to his name, even though his identity was as yet unsuspected. No such reference, however, was made in his hearing. The chief figure in the conversation that evening was

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someone of the name of Bangs, who was, he gathered, expected to arrive any minute, and for whom, no doubt, the still empty table near the middle of the room was being reserved. Most of the people near Phipson appeared to have met Bangs at some time or other; and Phipson himself was becoming more and more puzzled as to what Bangs could have written. The name conveyed simply nothing to him.

Nor did 'Bangs', when he arrived at last, look like a famous writer. He had motored over from somewhere, and hadn't had the time or the inclination to change before dinner. He was a tall and massive man, with a Roman nose and a remarkable chin to match, wearing a hairy tweed suit, grey stockings, and brogues with the widest welts Phipson had ever seen. The word 'plinth' came into his mind when he saw them.

Phipson was so intrigued that he ventured to address the purple-faced man with the red-faced wife, whose table was unpleasantly squeezing his into the corner.

'Excuse me,' Phipson said very politely; 'but could you tell me who that is, the man who has just come in?'

'Bangs. Bangs of Poona,' was the reply, delivered with a stony stare from two pale blue eyes under very little forehead but over a great deal of cheek, chin, and jowl.

It was towards the end of the third day that Phipson began to realise how safe he was at the Splendid. In the course of that time he had only once been spoken to, and no one seemed to want to know him. It appeared, indeed, that all the other visitors in the hotel composed one great family party. Not that they were related, but they had all at one time or another been in India together, and also, for many, many years, long before the Syndicat d'Initiative had awakened to the

possibilities of the town as a *station hivernale*, had frequented Neuville in the winter. They played golf together all day and billiards together all the evening; and their conversation was always of those games or of the people they all knew, or of places they had been in together, chiefly India. Very, very rarely did Phipson overhear any reference to literature, and then it was a passing allusion to one of those authors whose names were known to him only by publishers' advertisements. Generally it took the form of someone saying that he or she had just finished that one and begun another.

The one occasion on which Phipson had been addressed was when Bangs himself had come over to him in the hall after tea and asked him if he were any relation to the Phipson of the 17th Lancers who had been at Poona in '98. Phipson thought not.

'You spell your name with two p's, don't you?' Bangs asked.

'One only,' Phipson said coldly. Bangs went away.

But that was on the day after Phipson's arrival. He had not realised then that at the Splendid two p's might count for more than the authorship of *Deep Unto Deep*.

It was not, indeed, until the fifth day that he began to suffer the queer sensation of being smaller than he used to be. At first he attributed this to the fact that there were so many big men in the hotel; none quite so massive as Bangs of Poona, but several who approached that magnificent standard. That, too, accounted, he supposed, for the fact that no one ever seemed to notice him. Even the waiters took less and less notice of him as the days went by.

The famous climate was living up to its reputation,

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and when it was not raining in torrents there was a bitter wind off the sea; but Phipson took to hunting the town; picking out the smallest Frenchman he could see—there were a few French people in the town; though they all spoke English—and walking just beside him. But the strange illusion of being shorter than he had been when he left England still persisted. He fought against it for a day or two; and tried the effect of re-reading the copies of his own works that he had brought with him; but he found it very difficult to keep his attention. He was haunted by the perpetual consciousness that he had never been in India and spelt his name with only one p.

It hardly came as a shock to Phipson when he first found it necessary to stand on his valise in order to see himself in the glass while he shaved. He was becoming accustomed by then to the sense of being so much smaller than anyone else at the Splendid. It was, indeed, something of a relief to him when he was able to walk under instead of round the tables in order to reach his own little corner. Not that anyone ever looked at him, but he was still afraid that one day they might, and then they would probably ask him again how he spelt his insignificant, under-lettered name. His chief trouble was that the waiters hardly ever saw him now; and although he wanted very little to eat, he did occasionally want something.

He was scrambling about the floor looking for crumbs when Bangs inadvertently trod upon him. Bangs swore under his breath, not very far under, and passed on. And one of the waiters cleared up the mess with a dust-pan and brush.

There was very little mess.

THE THREE CASES



THE FIRST (1910)

JOAN had never been quite so conscious of the fact that it was 'good to be alive', as she was that afternoon.

The day had begun well. She had awakened with a feeling of happiness to find the sun just struggling through the morning mist and throwing a patterned shadow of grey and gold upon the wall above her bed. For a minute or two she had lain in the comfort of perfect physical ease watching the gold fade and quicken; now dying almost to invisibility and now glowing so brightly that she could trace every design of the lace window-curtain through which it shone.

Then, with a sudden fury of eagerness, she had jumped out of bed and gone over to the window. 'It's going to be a perfectly gorgeous day!' she murmured, a little awed by the prospect of all the happiness that awaited her. Life had been a little dull lately, and she had been looking forward to this tennis party for more than a week. After supper they might have a carpet dance! And she had so dreaded that, after all, it might be wet. They had had so much rain that summer.

But when she had drawn back the lace curtains and thrown the sash still a little higher, she had put all fear of the weather out of her mind. It had needed no expert to read the signs of that September morning—the straight columns of smoke from the awakening

village in the valley; the crystalline white dew that covered the lawn with a magically smooth drapery of dull silver; the increasing fire of the rising sun already dominating the low mist and casting long, strange morning shadows to westward.

'A perfectly ripping day,' Joan had repeated in a kind of ecstasy.

Afterwards she had danced over to the cheval glass and permitted herself a brief, critical, but not too critical, examination. She had had to admit, though she had pretended to make the admission grudgingly, that she 'wasn't really bad-looking'. Five feet seven was quite a good height and—she put her hands to her waist and tightened the lines of her nightdress—her figure was all right. Those golden-brown masses of her hair were—yes, she wouldn't hedge about that—they were, in a way, splendid, and certainly unusual. And if it was a little difficult for a girl to judge the precise attractiveness of those familiar, rather classical features, she could say, at least, that she did look decently intelligent. Anyway, there was nothing wrong with her complexion.

When she had tried on the new white piqué tennis skirt before lunch, and had found that by some miracle, little Miss Thomas, the dressmaker, had succeeded where she had so often failed in the past, Joan had had one moment of superstition. Was it possible that things were going altogether too well with her? Would she, perhaps, have to suffer for all this good luck? Perhaps she would be 'off her game', when the lightning tournament was played? Or was she going to make some terrible *faux pas* as she had a year ago on her seventeenth birthday?

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But as the afternoon wore on she had entirely forgotten that moment of uneasiness. This was *her* day. She was on the top of her form and was looking her best—and a very good best at that, if she could judge by the attention that was being paid to her. She did not want to be unkind or selfish or the least little bit spiteful, but the other girls did seem rather out of it—in a way.

If only Bernard would buck up a bit and not go about with that air of mysterious and tragic purpose! Why couldn't he be jolly and amusing like Philip Craig or Jack Meagher? Surely one might enjoy oneself on one's birthday?

She found an opportunity to chip him about his seriousness while she was waiting for her partner, Philip Craig, to play the final in the tournament. Bernard was going to umpire and mark for them, and she joined him by the net.

'Sorry your luck's out,' she said flippantly.

He looked up at her reproachfully. 'Is my luck out?' he asked, as if he wished to convey some special, half-hidden meaning.

'I was only judging by your expression,' Joan returned. 'You do look so utterly and desperately—funereal.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, with a sigh. 'The truth is that a man at the hospital, a man we were all rather keen on, died this morning. We thought we were going to pull him through, you see, and he was such an awfully decent chap.'

Joan frowned and looked out across the lawn, hoping to see Philip. His racquet had sprung in the last set and he had gone to borrow one from Jack Meagher, who had been knocked out in the last round.

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She was sorry about Bernard's patient, of course, but she did not want to think of hospitals just now. 'This was *her* day and she meant to enjoy it to the full.

'Rotten luck,' she commented. 'But I suppose that sort of thing happens fairly often in a doctor's life? You rather have to make up your mind to it, I mean?'

'I suppose one will get used to it, in time,' Bernard said thoughtfully. Then he looked up at her and went on more briskly. 'But—I say—I'm sorry, Joan. I don't want to spoil your party. I'll try to forget it. In fact, I'll promise to forget it, if only you'll——'

But she was hardly attending, and at that moment she caught sight of Philip and their two opponents coming out of the house.

'Oh, good! Here they are at last!' she interrupted him, and waved her racquet eagerly at the advancing party.

'I shall get a chance of talking to you some time to-day, I suppose?' Bernard put in, desperately.

'I expect so. Why not?' Joan asked. 'We're going to have a dance, you know. You'll be able to stay for that, won't you?'

'I ought not to, but I will,' he said.

He seemed to have something more to say, but she gave him no opportunity. Everyone was coming in the direction of the court, now, to watch the final; and she was not particularly anxious to be found alone with Bernard.

'Good. I'm glad you can stay,' she said, with a little conventional smile, as she moved to meet her partner.

If she and Philip had not been right at the top of their form, they would certainly have lost that deciding set. Indeed, as they confided to one another, they *ought*

to have lost it, for their opponents were certainly a stroke better at ordinary times. But she and Philip simply had not been able to miss the ball. They nearly quarrelled in their eagerness to give each other the credit for having beaten the redoubtable Mr. and Mrs. Dickinson, six—three.

Joan had never liked Philip so well before. He was such a sport and so amusing. And she was not in the least offended when he kissed her, on the landing, just before dinner. It did not mean anything. There was no question of their being engaged or even of their being seriously in love with one another. It was just part of the general fun and good-fellowship of the day; another excitement to add to the many. Philip was a good sport and she did not believe half those stories about his being a waster. It was true that he was not as clever at his work as Bernard was. Philip had not passed his final yet, after seven years at the hospital, while Bernard who was a year younger, had taken his degree and was looked upon as a 'likely man'. But what was the good of being young and vigorous if you got no fun out of life? She had promised four dances to Philip and only two to Bernard.

But she knew perfectly well what was coming when he asked her to sit out their second dance.

'I will, if you'll promise to be cheerful,' she said lightly. 'And not talk about one of your—your cases.'

'I'll promise not to talk about that,' Bernard said earnestly; and then, 'where can we be quiet?' he asked, with a glance of impatience at the whirling couples who had just begun the next waltz.

She saw Philip go by with the pretty little Tasker girl; but he looked over her shoulder as he passed with

an expression that was obviously meant to convey to Joan a complete lack of interest in his partner.

'Let's go out to the formal garden,' she said. 'It will be cool there, but there's no end of a dew and the grass will be sopping.'

From the formal garden they could see the enormous circle of the harvest moon, red as an orange, just topping the trees in the spinney.

'It has been a simply perfect day,' Joan sighed.

'Not to me,' Bernard said.

'Oh! don't go and spoil it all!' she begged him. 'Do be gay, just for this one evening!'

'I say, you're not engaged to that chap Craig, are you Joan?' he asked, coming a little nearer to her.

'Engaged? Good Heavens, no!' she said.

'And you're not—you're not—in love with him?'

'Rather not. He's good fun, that's all.'

'I'm confoundedly jealous of him all the same, Joan.'

'Jealous!' she repeated, with a touch of scorn.

'You don't think I've any right to be?' he asked.

'It does sound rather as if I belonged to you,' she said.

She was so very sure at that moment that she did not want to belong to anyone. She wanted to be free to get all the joy she could out of life. She was so aware of herself as being a success; she looked forward to still greater successes; and could not bear the thought of being tied, limited.

'Do you think it's possible that you will, Joan?' Bernard was saying. 'You know it's always been *you*. I've never thought twice about any other girl.'

Why couldn't he have kissed her as Philip had done, instead of standing two yards away and glowering at

her? The moonlight was on his face and he looked so sombre and intense. He meant to take life with a great earnestness. And although she liked him more than any man she had ever met, she did not feel inclined to pledge herself to follow his example—not just yet.

‘You mean that you want us to be—engaged? To tell everyone?’ she asked.

He nodded fiercely. ‘I can’t help being jealous, Joan,’ he said. ‘When I see you with that fellow Craig, my blood boils. I can’t bear anyone else to touch you.’

She had a sudden spasm of fear. What would he do if he knew that Philip had kissed her and that she had not resented it? He might do something desperate, something awful. He was so terribly in earnest. There would be no more fun of that sort for her if she was once engaged to Bernard.

‘I don’t want to be engaged just yet,’ she said firmly. ‘I’m only eighteen to-day and I—I don’t want to tie myself up. I can’t promise not to flirt with other men.’

He caught his breath with a gasp. ‘But you don’t—’ he began.

‘Yes, I do,’ she interrupted him quickly. ‘I suppose I don’t take life so seriously as you do—yet.’

With her last word she had given him another chance, but he did not appear to realise it. He was standing very still—a strange black and white statue, she thought, to be poised there against the background of sundial and yew hedge, of stone pavement and formal flower-beds, that in the increasing brilliance of the whitening moon had so graceful an air of antiquity.

‘It’s no good, Joan,’ he said at last. ‘I—can’t—stand it. I shall have to give up seeing you. It’s obvious that

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you don't care for me—not in the way I want you to—and I can't be content with anything less. You can't understand what torture it is to me to see you even dancing with a fellow like Craig. And—oh no! it's no good. I'll have to—have to cure myself.'

He swung round abruptly without one last glance at her. He had the air of a man making the great decision and renunciation of his life. He was strong and determined, able to resist temptation and endure pain. She had no doubt that his decision was made now, once and for all—that he had put her resolutely out of his thoughts—out of his life.

'I won't cry. Why should I?' Joan said, as she looked at herself in the cheval glass before she undressed.

She was sorry, very sorry in a way, about Bernard; but he was too serious about things.

And to-morrow. . . .

Yes, that was the trouble, he was too serious.

THE SECOND (1917)

She awoke to a sense of oppression and strain. She turned on the light and looked at her watch. It was seven o'clock, but the little window of her tiny room looked out across a yard twenty feet wide on to the grey and lofty flank of a factory wall, and even at mid-day the room was rather dark.

She must get up at once. She was on duty at half-past seven, and she was anxious to know as soon as possible if Corporal Heath had lived through the night. The Chief had said that if he did there would be a chance for him.

And to-day she had to attend that semi-official luncheon party at Lady Brightmore's to meet Colonel

Bernard James of the R.A.M.C., who was coming down afterwards to inspect the hospital and see if there was the least hope of squeezing another ten beds into their already overcrowded wards. She resented that proposition and hoped that she might exercise her personal influence with Colonel James to prevent its being carried out. If it had not been for that, she would not have accepted the invitation to lunch. It was a long way from the hospital to Eaton Square, and she had so much to do. She had been on duty for nearly fourteen hours yesterday.

With deft, automatic hands, she twisted up her great coil of golden brown hair, pinned it neatly into place and covered it with her nurse's cap. She stood in front of the glass as she did these things, but though her eyes watched and directed the operation, her mind was completely occupied with other thoughts. Her movements in dressing were those of a swift, efficient machine. When she had finished dressing, she looked exquisitely neat and trim, but she took no more pride in the result than if she had been draping a lay figure.

One glance at the Sister's face as Joan relieved her was sufficient. She knew before her eyes travelled up the ward to the ominous screen that poor Corporal Heath had not survived the night.

'Soon after five,' the Sister murmured. 'They are coming for him at once. The new case for that bed will be in at nine o'clock. You'll see that everything's ready?'

With an effort Joan composed her face to that expression of confident cheerfulness which was expected from her, and turned to her duties.

By the exercise of some magic into which Joan did

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not inquire, the porter succeeded in getting a taxi for her. She was glad to avoid that tedious train journey by Aldgate to Victoria, with its endless stoppages, and the long ride in the taxi gave her a little time for quiet and contemplation. She wanted to arrange her arguments against further overcrowding of the Eastern Hospital. Lady Brightmore was President of some Charitable Committee that had equipped and organised a hospital down in Surrey, and she was very anxious not to have the extra beds foisted upon her. Hers was what she described as a perfectly 'dinky' hospital—the most luxurious in Europe, so she boasted—and she meant to keep it so.

Joan had no hope of influencing Lady Brightmore, who did not really care twopence for the men themselves, only for the reputation of running the dinkiest hospital in Europe; but she believed that there would be a good chance of getting Colonel James on her side.

She had not seen him for seven years, and they had been little more than boy and girl then; but she perfectly well remembered his proposal to her by moonlight in the formal garden. She had had many proposals of marriage since then, and some of them she had completely forgotten, but she would never forget Bernard's. When she closed her eyes she could still see the intense, earnest lines of his strong face. Well, he had justified the faith that they had had in him at his old hospital. At thirty-two he was a known man, almost famous.

She was glad that it was he who was going to inspect and report. He would take his duties seriously and pay no attention to the charms and solicitations of Lady Brightmore. It might be, Joan thought, that she her-

self would still have a little, a very little, influence with him. She knew that he had never married.

It gave her a slight shock to hear the heartiness of his laughter as the butler announced her. He was standing at the far end of the room, talking to his hostess; telling her, apparently, some extremely funny story. The smile was still on his face as he turned to greet her.

'No need to introduce me to Miss Hastings,' he said to Lady Brightmore. 'We knew one another as children.' His expression steadied for a moment as he continued. 'I've heard that you've found your vocation as a nurse. I congratulate you'; and then without waiting for a reply, he continued his conversation with his hostess.

His laugh seemed new to Joan. She could not remember whether he used to laugh like that in the old days? And just now, it rather jarred on her. She thought it was strange that his experience as a surgeon should have taught him to laugh!

She made her protest after lunch, but she was afraid that it had little effect. Colonel James watched her seriously and attentively while she was speaking, but afterwards he spoilt everything by making a rather humorous speech in which he made light of her plea against overcrowding and said that quantity was at the moment more important than quality.

Joan was annoyed. She saw his point, and quite understood that very special effort had to be made to accommodate as many cases as possible, even if it did mean slightly less hygienic conditions for everyone. But she intensely resented his attentions to Lady Brightmore. Joan had a horrible presentiment that he

meant to thrust ten more beds into her own crowded wards and leave that detestable 'dinky' hospital in Surrey untouched.

She hardly spoke a word as they went back together, the three of them, in Lady Brightmore's car to the East End. Indeed, she hardly had a chance to speak. Lady Brightmore absorbed all the Colonel's interest. She was evidently trying to seduce him into letting her off as lightly as possible. Just before they reached the Eastern Hospital, she leaned forward, laid her hand on his arm and said:

'But, my dear Colonel, of course we must all do everything we can, and I'm going to make a very great effort to get at least *four* new beds in.'

'How very charming and delightful of you, dear lady,' was his apparently enthusiastic reply.

Four beds! Joan reflected with a curl of her lip. Why, they could easily take ten or even twelve. It was disgusting! She could hardly trust herself to speak as she showed them over the wards. But she took her chance when she was introducing them to the house surgeon and the matron.

'I have shown Colonel James that we shall be dangerously overcrowded if we have to find accommodation for ten more beds,' she said. 'But he seems to think that it doesn't matter if we lose *our* cases.'

He showed no sign of being offended by that. He was smiling—for the benefit of Lady Brightmore, Joan supposed. And then he began, very cleverly she had to admit, to make suggestions and plans by which the accommodation of the Eastern could be stretched still a little further.

She did not wait to hear the end of his arrangements.

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She was afraid of losing her self-control and bursting into tears. But when she had slipped away and found refuge in the matron's sitting-room, she controlled herself again. Crying would do no good, and she would not cry; but she did so hate the feeling of having failed.

And then the door opened and he came in, alone.

'The matron thought that I might find you here,' he said. 'And I wanted just to see you before I went, to tell you that your advocacy has had some weight and that I've decided to reduce the number of extra beds from ten to seven.'

He paused and looked at her very straightly, but there was still the suggestion of a smile in his eyes.

'Seven!' Joan repeated. 'It will be seven too many.'

'In normal conditions,' he replied gently.

She looked up and met his gaze boldly. She had meant to challenge him about Lady Brightmore's hospital, but she saw a new expression in his face that made her change her mind. He looked as if, most astoundingly, he were going to make love to her. He probably made love to every pretty woman he met, now! Half an hour ago he had been flirting outrageously with that contemptible little doll in the car.

Joan straightened her back and stared at him, with the cold fury of her indignation evident in every line of her figure, in the set of her mouth, in the cold appraisal of her dark blue eyes.

And then, without another word, he turned quickly and walked out of the room, with a set of his shoulders that reminded her vividly of the back of the young determined man who had left her alone, seven years before, in the moonlight of the formal garden.

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But now she could hardly pretend to be sorry. What could she possibly say to a man who seemed to take such vital problems so lightly?

It was only himself and his own ambitions that he could take seriously.

And she remembered with a sudden pang of regret, the plain earnest face of Corporal Heath, who had died that morning.

* * *

Not until nearly a week later did she learn that no less than thirty new beds were to be added to Lady Brightmore's 'dinky' little hospital, that the whole place was to be reorganised; and that Lady Brightmore herself had resigned her place on the committee.

But Colonel James had returned to France.

THE THIRD (1922)

Joan greeted the morning sun with a sense of great responsibility. After two years of idleness she was working again, helping with a private case at the earnest request of the patient herself, Mrs. Fernald; one of Joan's dearest friends; a woman of fifty, whose really valuable life was threatened by some serious internal disorder. Yet despite her anxiety, Joan was not really unhappy as she pulled up her blind and gazed out over the Palace Gardens at the clear brightness of the day. She had a feeling that everything was wonderfully going to be all right.

She had been glad to assist with Mrs. Fernald's case as she hoped it might help her to solve a personal difficulty.

Sir George Wisbech, her father's nearest neighbour in Hampshire, wished to marry her, and if she could

not pretend to herself that she was the least in love, she did, in a way, admire and respect him. Indeed, her chief cause for hesitation had been the thought of her future. For the past two years she had been living much the same sort of existence that she would live for the rest of her life if she became Lady Wisbech, and the prospect filled her with a terror of increasing *ennui*. She had dared to look far ahead into the future and had seen herself at fifty, with her children—if she had any—growing up, herself with no engrossing occupation or ambition. Her husband would be seventy by then, and it might be that the next ten years would have to be devoted to looking after him. He might quite well live to eighty.

So when the case gave her an opportunity, she had decided to postpone any decision until she had tested herself, had discovered by this further experiment whether or not she had, as she had once been told, found her true vocation in nursing. She had had some terrible experiences in the war, but sometimes it seemed to her that she had been more truly happy then. She had, at least, been alive.

It was strange to see herself in her nurse's dress again. She paused before the cheval glass seeing herself suddenly from a new point of view. In the old days of stress and worry she had never stopped to consider whether this particular dress suited her. Her only interest had been to keep herself neat and clean. Now, she saw that a nurse's uniform was, in her case at least, exceedingly becoming. It set off the curves of her upright, firmly-modelled figure; it gave a kind of spirituality to the regular lines of her rather classical features, and brought out the blueness of her eyes. Her

single criticism was that the cap hid too effectively the rich, warm colour of her golden-brown hair. She had a smaller cap. Perhaps she might wear that? She was not, after all, going to be present at the operation. She decided in favour of the smaller cap.

The surgeon was coming at eleven o'clock. She had not heard his name, yet; and although she pressed her face close to the glass of the dining-room window, she could not catch a sight of him as he got out of his car.

He went straight upstairs, but old Dr. Price, Mrs. Fernald's own physician, came into Joan for a minute, while the surgeon was making his preparations. She was very fond of Dr. Price, who had known her all her life, and she had meant to ask him who was performing the operation, but in the flutter of that brief interview she forgot to put her question. All her concern, at that moment, was for her patient.

Dr. Price's report was ostensibly reassuring, but Joan thought she could detect the signs of a deep anxiety that he was trying to hide from her; and when he had gone a sudden depression of spirit overwhelmed her. She could visualise all too well what was going on in that upstairs room, and she was afraid. Just then, it seemed to her almost impossible that any human being could survive the shock of that deep-thrust surgeon's knife.

It was so much worse when this thing happened to a close friend, worse even than if one had to endure it oneself. And Marian Fernald's life was such a very precious one. Did the surgeon realise that, Joan wondered? She had so often seen surgeons joking with one another or with the anaesthetist, as if the patient on the

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operating table were nothing more than a dummy to be experimented upon.

Joan drew a deep breath of pain and clenched her hands at the thought that upstairs the surgeon might be joking with the anaesthetist, while Marian——

And then old Dr. Price came in, holding out his hands to her; and the expression on his face was sufficient to tell Joan that so far, at least, all had gone magnificently well.

‘Couldn’t have been better,’ he said. ‘Couldn’t have been better. I’m so glad that we could get Bernard James. Finest surgeon in the world. I mean it seriously, my dear Miss Hastings—the finest surgeon in the world.’

‘Bernard James!’ Joan repeated, almost under breath. She felt as if a cold, keen air had suddenly blown upon her, stirring her hair and strangely thrilling every separate nerve of her body. She realised that she was on the verge of tears, tears of great emotional happiness that she attributed to her joy at hearing of Marian’s safety.

‘Yes, splendid fellow,’ Dr. Price was saying. ‘But you know him personally, of course. He was asking me just after the operation who was the second nurse—he thinks of everything. Treats each case as if it were the only one in the world and his whole reputation depended upon it. And—what was I saying? Yes, yes; when I gave him your name, he said: “I thought that she had given up nursing. I should like to see her”. He will be here in a moment, no doubt.’

Joan turned away. She could not face Dr. Price’s kind old eyes just then. Something very strange was happening to her. It was as if after seeking all her life

for some precious possession she had been unexpectedly confronted with it, after she had given up the search. And—why she didn't know—she was afraid. She wanted to run away—to escape from the house before he could find her—to escape and not to return until Marian was quite well again.

But she must wait a moment to get back her strength. Her legs were trembling, her whole body. And while she still stood grasping the window-ledge to support herself, she heard another voice in the room behind her—a few words of almost inaudible conversation—the sound of old Dr. Price's voice saying 'good-bye', and then the firm closing of the door.

She dared not turn round, but she knew, although the room was now quite still, that she was not alone. She was as sensitively aware of his presence there as though she could see and hear and touch him. And presently she knew that he was coming across the room to her, although his feet made no sound on the soft, deep carpet.

She did not start nor move when she heard his voice close beside her.

'Will you hear me this time, Joan?' he said, in a low voice, that was not quite steady. 'I must tell you, now; at once! I can't wait another hour. You see, Joan, it has always seemed to me that we have never really parted since I left you at the sundial. I never kept my vow to forget you, not for a single second. The thought of you has been with me, my one companion in misery and happiness for twelve years. And when we met all those years ago in the middle of the war, it was almost more than I could bear. But I knew then that still you were not ready for me. Once you had been too gay, but

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then you were too grave. We had to learn apart, that life is neither all joy nor all sadness. Do you know it, now, Joan? Do you know it, now?’

She tried to speak and her tears choked her, but she turned to him and gave herself into his arms; gave herself ecstatically to him who was so grave and yet so light of heart, who had been touched with a deep tenderness for all the suffering of the world, but had never lost his appreciation for joy and laughter.

JUSTICE: AN IMPARTIAL COMMENT



STEPHEN FAWCETT sat with his head in his hands, staring down at the varnished surface of the table upon which his elbows were resting. It reminded him of the book-board in the seat of the church he used to attend as a boy. The colour was the same, gamboge yellow with a brown regular grain—and the smell. It had been the characteristic smell of the church—newly-varnished pine; a clean, arid smell, not unpleasant in itself, but associated in his mind with stiff, Sunday clothes and a period of hushed constraint. One had to be good; to sit very still and be good. After the service had begun, he had always forgotten the smell; it reminded him only of that period of distasteful confinement and unoccupied waiting.

Drake, the chemist, was speaking, tediously reviewing certain aspects of the evidence; but adding nothing to their understanding of the case. He was merely exhibiting his own powers of memory. He liked to show how closely he had attended to all the evidence and how accurately he was able to report it. He was speaking just as he spoke at committees, without any feeling other than pride in his own ability. If he were asked directly for his opinion he probably would not be able to answer. He did not care whether she were sent to penal servitude for twenty years, or even if they hanged her.

Would they hang her? Whatever the verdict, there

would certainly be a strong recommendation to mercy. He would see to that. . . . The chief difference was that as he was sitting at the head of the table, the grain ran lengthwise away from him. On the book-board, it had run across.

Drake had finished and old Thompson was dwelling on the Judge's summing-up, probably the only thing he had understood. He was an old fool, but conscientious and almost painfully anxious to do the right thing. He had tried to do the right thing all his life, the respectable, honest thing that everyone would approve. Thompson believed in majorities, vox populi, and so on; and he trusted, now, entirely to the Judge. He wanted to bring in a verdict that the Judge would approve. That was all he cared for, to please the Judge.

And then Cresswell, flippant, talking of her good looks, and of giving her the benefit of the doubt. He evidently wanted to settle the thing off-hand and get back to his horses. It was a serious matter for Cresswell to lose five days. People with ailing horses wanted them attended to quickly, and if Cresswell himself wasn't there, someone else would get the job. He was for letting her off, now; probably because of her good looks. But if the majority were in favour of a verdict of guilty, he would vote with them, in order to get back as quickly as possible to his practice.

She had turned and looked him full in the eyes just before they left the box. Her face had been set and hard, but he had known that she was pleading with him to do what he could for her. She trusted him because he had always been straight. If he had not, he might have been in the witness-box, instead of that

fellow Jerningham who had perjured himself so eagerly that nobody had believed him.

Leek's comments were negligible. He would work himself up into an agony in his perfectly sincere desire to return a just verdict, but he had no intellectual judgment. His writing was like that; a passionate plea for some vague ideal of righteousness which he could not define.

But one had to be good. The best way was to fix your attention on something. He remembered that 'island'—he had always called it an island in his mind—where the grain splayed out each side and made a shape like a bobbin. He had had adventures on that island and it had kept him good, not only when they were waiting for the service to begin, but also during the sermon.

Field and Sturton-Brown were wasting time over a hair-splitting argument on a minor point of the evidence; getting warm over it; as if they were debating some nice intricacy of the Tariff Reform problem. Both able men, each in his own way, but too concerned about details. And old Mosendew, with his hands clasped over his stomach, just listening. He would not say anything; and he would vote with the majority. No doubt he wished his wife were there to advise him.

To be 'good', yes; but now it was not going to be a question of just keeping still. He had to make his own decision, not upon the case, for he knew, had known for certain since the third day of the trial that she had given her husband that extra arsenic which Dr. Bailey had so positively asserted that he must have had. Bailey had had his reputation to defend, and they all guessed that in his own mind he was not quite so cock-

sure as he had pretended to be. But he, Stephen Fawcett, was certain because he had suddenly solved, for himself, the problem of where she had obtained the arsenic, a feat that had been beyond the powers of the prosecuting counsel who knew nothing about that old parson step-brother of hers with his hobby for ornithology. No mention had been made of her visit to him, ten days before her husband died; probably no one but himself knew—or remembered. He had not remembered either until the third day of the trial, and then it had come to him in a flash. What ought he to have done? Made a communication to the Judge, retired from the jury and offered himself as a witness at the new trial? And what ought he to do now? Very well to say be ‘good’. In what did ‘goodness’ consist? For him? Now?

Mrs. Swettenham, at least, was talking common-sense. Too much in the political platform manner, perhaps, but her insistence on the necessity of giving the prisoner the benefit of the doubt was really the crux of the whole affair. There was a doubt; no question about that; in the minds of counsel and of the Judge. As Mrs. Swettenham was saying, the Judge’s summing-up had been a model of impartiality. No sex-jealousy about her; a nice clean-minded woman, but what would she have said if she had known what he knew?

How far did one’s responsibility reach, and to whom or what was one responsible? One’s own conscience? The public weal? God? If they let her off, who would be the worse? Jerningham, perhaps, eventually. If he married her, he might go the same way as number one. No denying that she was that sort of woman; hand-

some, passionate, unrestrained—just the sort to poison her husband. Why in the name of everything hadn't she gone off with Jerningham, instead? Two answers to that; both good ones. She wanted to keep her respectability. Wonderful what an influence that was with women! And she wanted, *they* wanted the money. How many people were doing penal servitude at this moment because they had wanted respectability and money?

Dear old Jervis was all for letting her off of course. He'd have said the same things if her guilt had been proved up to the hilt. Tolstoyan! Tolstoyans ought not to serve on juries. Nobody took any notice of them. And that instance of the woman taken in adultery was not happily chosen, in this case. They had not been able to prove that Jerningham was her lover already, only that he wanted to be.

It certainly seemed as if, knowing what he did, he ought to use all his influence to bring in a verdict of guilty; not by telling them what he knew—that was out of the question—but by persuading his fellow-jurymen. He could do that. He felt within himself the certainty that he could do that. They did not care enough to oppose him. He would get them all probably, except Mrs. Swettenham and old Jervis.

Miss Whitehead was nervous and anxious, but she obviously wanted to oppose Mrs. Swettenham. Mrs. Whitehead's people were a conservative lot. No trouble about her.

After all, there was something fine in this ideal of Justice. If this woman had killed her husband, she ought to be punished. How could society defend itself otherwise? Society stood for a high moral efficiency.

It was based on a rigid code of ethics, which it was one's duty to uphold. Not that there had been much talk of any abstract ethical standard in the jury-room. The fact was that they had been too self-conscious, all of them, and too afraid—afraid of not doing the Right thing.

It wasn't often that you came up against these tremendous uncertainties in ordinary life. You generally knew, more or less, what was the right thing to do, the thing sanctified by tradition, the thing public opinion and the Church would approve. Well, for him, that was fairly obvious. He was convinced of her guilt, and the public opinion and the Church would be on his side, if he succeeded, as he could, in persuading his jury to bring in a verdict of Guilty—with, of course, a strong recommendation to mercy. But for the rest of them, there was no such satisfying certainty. They didn't know what they *ought* to do; most of them.

Elliott! He had almost forgotten him. He'd been waiting till they had all had their say. Just like him. And now this denunciation; as if he were preaching in his own chapel. She was a vile and wicked woman, was she? Only fit for the flames of hell! They had a duty before them that they couldn't shirk. They were responsible to God who had laid this charge upon them, to punish the greatest of all sins. Not a word as to the evidence; as to whether or not she had committed the sin. As a matter of fact, Elliott wasn't thinking of murder. He was one of those crazy creatures who was mad about 'purity'. Mad. People like that were not sane. He must be almost frothing at the mouth, now. Wild; ready to tear himself to pieces if he could but get that poor woman hanged. He'd get real pleasure from seeing her hanged. He would like to stand and gloat

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on her physical pains; he would like to see her pulled to pieces with red-hot irons. You could hear it in his voice; see it no doubt, if you looked up, in his eyes, in the twitching of his hands. Justice? Good God; Elliott didn't want justice; he wanted Revenge. Revenge on women like that unfortunate in the dock; all the passionate, beautiful women that he tried to loathe in the name of righteousness.

But, good Heavens, Elliott made you see things in a new light! He did make you see the beauties of charity, of tenderness, of forgiveness, of a God of infinite patience and mercy; the sort of God who would know how that poor creature had been tempted; the sort who would smile sweetly and compassionately and give her another chance. Perhaps, there was something to be said for old Jervis's point of view. In any case . . .

For the first time since he had sat down at the head of that table, Stephen Fawcett lifted his head from his hands and looked round at the men and women who had been closeted with him there now for just over an hour. He had a strange sense, as he did so, of seeing them suddenly dwindle and harden, or was it as if they were trying to hide themselves?

He stood up, slowly, with an effect of almost reluctant deliberation; and then with his head once more downcast; and his eyes following again that running grain of the table which would for evermore remain to him as a symbol of something vast and sacred beyond all understanding, he said:

'Ladies and gentlemen, I have listened with the greatest interest and attention to all that you have said; and I congratulate myself on having had the honour to

act as foreman to a jury every member of which has displayed insight, understanding and, may I say, generosity. And the point that your patient discussion has made even more clear to me than the hearing of the case in Court, is that none of us, with the possible exception of Mr. Elliott, is in any way convinced that the prisoner has been guilty either of murder or adultery. Nor do I believe that we should come to any certainty on either of these points, if we stayed here for a week. In these circumstances, we cannot, I submit, return a verdict of guilty. To do so would violate the cause of justice we have sworn to advance, and would lay upon our consciences, the terrible sense of having condemned a fellow creature to death without any sureness as to why we had done it. There remain, then, two alternatives. If we disagree, we shall I take it, be sent back by the Judge to reconsider the case, and it may be that we shall have to spend many more hours, here, before we are discharged and the case set down again for a new trial. On the other hand, can we find it in our minds to return a plain verdict of Not Guilty? For myself, I will be quite plain with you, I should have no hesitation in returning such a verdict. We are all, with the possible exception of Mr. Elliott, agreed that there is no positive evidence strong enough to convict the prisoner; and, if I may say so without appearing unduly to influence you, I have a strong feeling that, well, that Christ, I say it in all reverence, would be on our side. However, I leave that to each of you to decide for yourselves, and I leave you to vote as to whether we shall decide to force upon the Court, by sheer patient effort, our inability to agree; or return a verdict of Not Guilty.'

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They were all very tired. And they all had businesses of their own or engrossing occupations of some kind.

They returned a verdict of Not Guilty with only one dissentient.

The Judge, without other comment, exempted them from further jury-service for a term of five years.

THE AIR OF PARIS



MR. ABEL PICKERING was a man of quiet tastes. At the age of thirty-seven he was still unmarried because he preferred a quiet life. His choice was deliberate. As manager to Cortex & Co. he was earning a salary of £1,200 a year, and he had in addition a small private income of his own. He could well afford to marry, and he had a suspicion that Mrs. Fulborne might accept him if he asked her. She was a particularly attractive widow, ten years younger than himself, and had many admirers. But he was not tempted. He had his garden—he was an enthusiastic rose-grower—and his books. He spent quite a considerable sum of money every year on books, having a cultivated taste for first editions. Also, he was a man of settled habits; and marriage would necessarily change his belovedly familiar routine in some respects. Above all, he knew nothing about women, did not understand them. Even his housekeeper, who was over sixty, and had been his nurse when he was a child, had her moments of queer incomprehensibility. Mr. Pickering had, in fact, made up his mind many years ago never to have any relationships, not even an intimate friendship, with a woman.

He was exceedingly surprised when Mr. Mansfield, the senior partner of Cortex & Co., asked him to go to Paris, just as he was leaving the office one evening.

‘Paris!’ Mr. Pickering repeated, in much the same

tone he might have used if he had been asked to go to Peking.

'Yes,' Mr. Mansfield replied. 'It's absolutely impossible for me to get away to-morrow; Mr. Owen, as you know, is laid up with a broken leg; and someone must represent us at the board meeting of the French company on Thursday morning. Do you speak French, by the way?'

'I don't know,' Mr. Pickering said.

That was the simple truth. He was always accurate in his statements. He had taught himself to read French many years before, and had a scholarly knowledge of the plays of Molière. But he had never tried to speak French, nor heard it spoken, and was quite uncertain whether he would be able to understand it or to make himself understood.

'That means you don't,' Mr. Mansfield returned drily.

'Possibly,' Mr. Pickering agreed.

'Never been in France?' Mr. Mansfield continued.

'Never,' Mr. Pickering replied. 'I have never, as a matter of fact, been out of England.'

Mr. Mansfield looked up and smiled.

'Be an experience for you, then,' he said. 'Well, there's a train that leaves Victoria at 10.30. If you go by that it will give you time to see a show to-morrow night. Try the Moulin Rouge, and tell me what you think of it when you come back. Here's a copy of the report that's going to be read at the meeting. You know all the particulars already. And if you have anything to say, you can say it in English. Sure to be someone to translate it for you, if necessary. Good luck.'

Even then, Mr. Pickering had a queer sense of release, of irresponsibility. He was not a nervous man, except in the company of women, and although he wondered whether or not he would be sea-sick crossing the Channel, he had no uneasiness about the journey. In his thirty-seven years of life he had never had a bad illness nor been in any serious difficulty; and he did not anticipate trouble just because he was going to Paris. France was a highly-civilised country, and he believed that on the French railway lines and in French hotels, English was always understood. His chief objection to the trip was that it upset his routine, and that objection was partly compensated for by this new, odd feeling of something like excitement. He could not remember having experienced quite the feeling before.

Any doubts he may have had as to the discomforts of sea-sickness were allayed by the weather, for the sea was as calm as a mill-pond; and he thoroughly enjoyed the crossing. He sat on the first-class deck and talked to a highly intelligent American business man who was quite familiar with the activities of Cortex & Co. A very interesting talk they had, and it was not until the packet was turning round to back into Calais harbour that the American by the merest chance put in a word that was to have a strange influence on Mr. Pickering's destiny.

'You know Paris pretty well, I guess?' he asked.

'My first visit,' Mr. Pickering admitted modestly.

'You don't say!' was the astonished reply. 'Where are you staying?'

'I suppose there'll be an hotel somewhere near the station?' Mr. Pickering suggested.

'Why, yes. There are hotels everywhere in Paris,' his American friend said; 'but if you'll take my advice you'll stay in a very agreeable pension I can tell you about. I've had a lot of my friends stay there. It's near the Eiffel Tower.'

And as Mr. Pickering particularly wanted to see the Eiffel Tower, he at once decided to accept this advice and stay in the Avenue de la Bourdonnais, although it was a long way from the Gare du Nord and from the Paris offices of Cortex & Co.

The disadvantage, however, proved to be the only one that could be urged, from his point of view, against the pension—a really first-class place in which everyone spoke English. This last consideration was a great relief to Mr. Pickering, as he had learnt quite definitely, on the train between Calais and Paris, that he did not speak French. It may have been that railway officials and porters do not habitually use the idiom of Molière, or that Mr. Pickering had been under a grave misconception as to the pronunciation of the language. In either case the effect was the same.

The pension guests dined together at two long tables, and Mr. Pickering found himself next to an Englishman named Banks, who had been in business in Paris ever since the war. They got on very well together, and after Mr. Pickering had modestly mentioned that he was the official representative of Cortex & Co., they had a most interesting conversation. This saved Mr. Pickering from the embarrassment of speaking to the lady on his right; though whether it were due to the new foreign atmosphere or the excitement of breaking away so completely from his usual routine, he had not felt nervous at having her so close to him; had, indeed,

been almost willing to talk to her if the occasion had offered.

After dinner, Mr. Banks was going out to play bridge with some friends.

'Otherwise I'd have been delighted to trot you round,' he explained.

'Trot me round?' questioned Mr. Pickering.

'We might have done a show together, you know,' Mr. Banks explained. 'The Moulin Rouge or the Folies Bergères. However, you can find them for yourself. Take a taxi from the Avenue. Taxis are cheap in Paris.'

But when he was left to himself, Mr. Pickering decided that he would not 'do a show'. He inferred that the Moulin Rouge was merely a rather fast music-hall, and he had no taste for music-halls. He was a teetotaller and did not smoke, disliked the atmosphere of such places, and was not amused by new variations of their only two subjects for humour—women and drink. He decided to go for a solitary stroll in this strange, exciting city of Paris, taking care not to go too far from the pension.

It was an exquisitely tranquil evening of mid-May, and the dusk had not yet definitely given place to the lights of the town. Mr. Pickering strolled down to the Quai d'Orsay, and thence on to the Pont d'Iéna, from which point of vantage he gazed up for a time at the vast impressive mass of the Eiffel Tower. 'Terrific!' was the only word he found to describe that feat of engineering, and after two or three minutes he became rather bored with it and turned his attention to the gardens of the Trocadéro, on the other side of the Seine.

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There could be no doubt, he reflected, that Paris was in some inexplicable way a romantic place. On a mild evening like this the effect of all these trees in the avenues was to give an air of attractive mystery to the streets. But there was something beyond that, something exhilarating in the very air of the place that in some indefinable way made you want a companion. It was a pity that Banks had had that bridge party this evening. Perhaps the music-halls here were more amusing than that he had once been to in London? If he went back to his pension he might summon up courage to talk to the woman who had sat on his right at dinner? If he could find her? But he would have preferred to talk to her out here. He felt that he would have more courage in the dusk of these romantic avenues. He could imagine himself saying quite daring things. Really, the air of Paris was curiously stimulating.

He had crossed the Seine while he was thus pleasantly meditating, had turned to the right up the Avenue de Tokio, and now found himself in the Place de l'Alma.

He decided that he might as well go a little farther; he could always get back to the pension in one of these cheap Paris taxis. And, having just avoided being run over in crossing the Place—all the traffic, including the trams, he noticed, was on the wrong side of the road—he hesitated as to which route he would take towards what he imagined to be the centre of the town. Fate advised him to choose the Avenue Marceau in preference to that of George V, because the name was more French.

But the Avenue Marceau did not appear to be at all

the kind of place he was looking for. He wanted to see the brilliant crowds he had read about; to find a seat in one of those famous cafés where you boldly expose yourself on the pavement, sip a modest cup of coffee, and watch the life of the gay city swirl about you. And the Avenue Marceau was dark, almost gloomy, and practically deserted except for the trams. When he came to the Avenue Pierre Ier. de Serbie, he decided to turn to the right. He had, however, gone but a few yards before he was arrested by the name, clearly visible in the light of the street lamp, of the turning in front of him: 'Impasse Pierre Charron.'

Something in that name struck him as being strangely romantic. The word 'impasse' alone held, he thought, a suggestion of forbidden sin; and he may be forgiven for having, in the excitement of the moment, confused the name of the sixteenth-century French moralist, Pierre Charron, the author of a treaty on wisdom, with that of the poet, Paul Scarron, the husband of Madame de Maintenon. Mr. Pickering, as has been implied, was quite a well-read man, and he remembered not only that Scarron was said to have prepared the way for Molière, but also the famous epitaph he had written for himself. How did it go?

*'Passant ne fais ici de bruit,
Gardes bien que tu ne l'éveille,
Car voici la première nuit
Que le pauvre Scarron sommeille.'*

Only, just then, Mr. Pickering said Charron instead of Scarron.

He took a few steps down the impasse, which was quite deserted, walking on tiptoe as if he passed the

tomb of the poet and, obeying his injunction, was careful to make no noise lest he should awake him on this perpetual night of his first sleep.

Yet, in itself, the impasse was not at all a mysterious place, with its tall, rather sombre, respectable-looking houses—flats, no doubt—expensive, perhaps, but surely not romantic.

He had nearly reached the bottom of the cul-de-sac, and was turning about to retrace his footsteps, when he discovered that he had paused in front of an open window.

It was a tall window with heavy casements opening up to the transom, and the sill was within four feet of the pavement. The outside shutters were fastened back against the wall, and both casements flung wide open into the room, which was brilliantly lit by a cluster of bulbs suspended from the centre of the ceiling; two brackets on the opposite wall and two more on either side of the pier glass over the mantelpiece.

Mr. Pickering had a queer impression of gazing through a great hole torn in the façade of the respectable street; of being given a miraculous opportunity of staring right into the heart of Paris life. It seemed to him as if he were the privileged spectator before a stage set for some intimate drama that would presently be played for his exclusive benefit.

And that was before he saw the woman who was the sole occupant.

Apart from his habit of not seeing women, he may be excused for having overlooked this one. She was kneeling on the farther side of the table in the centre of the room, with her head resting on her arms; and he

had come so quietly down the impasse that she had not heard him. Mr. Pickering, dazed by the light, had at first mistaken her round, dark head for a little black dog curled up on the table.

When he realised his error, his obvious course was to move away as quietly as he had come. His habitual shyness with women, common prudence, ordinary politeness, all dictated the same line of action. But he stood perfectly still staring fixedly at that pretty round head, and what he could see of two elegantly modelled bare forearms. He wondered if this beautiful creature was in great distress, or—but he dared not think of an alternative explanation—although surely it was not usual for a young and pretty woman to turn on all the lights in her sitting-room, fling open the windows and then expose herself to the gaze of every passer-by in an attitude of forlorn abandonment?

He was still trying not to think of an explanation when the lady moved. At first she rubbed her forehead along her arm, and then she lifted her head, sat back on her heels and gazed into the eyes of Mr. Pickering.

He would have run away then, but he was momentarily deprived of the power to move. All that he could do was to stand perfectly still and return the stare of the beautiful stranger. He had been quite right, she was beautiful; with dark eyes, an oval face and red lips. Oddly enough there was something in her general effect that made him think of the attractive widow, Mrs. Fulborne, who lived far, far away in another and quite different world, near London.

And had he, indeed, been the privileged theatrical spectator he had for an instant dreamed himself to be,

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he could hardly have enjoyed a more interesting spectacle than was now offered to him in the changing emotions that passed across the face of the lady still on her knees on the other side of that brilliantly lit apartment. The first emotion was unmistakably one of disappointment; her lips drooped, a frown gathered on her smooth forehead, and her hands fell with a gesture of despair into her lap. But almost at once that expression changed to one of antagonism and resentment. 'How dare you stand there and stare at me?' was the obvious question demanded by her raised eyebrows. Mr. Pickering blushed, and being now released from his paralysis would have moved away, if that challenging stare had not been succeeded by a new and bewildering series of changes—a pinching of the lips and narrowing of the eyes; an air of intense concentration of rapid thought; a look of appraisement and inquiry; giving place at last with an effect of sunlight breaking unexpectedly from a windy sky, to a sad, appealing smile.

The lady rose gracefully to her feet. She had, as Mr. Pickering realised, rather by a general intuition than by detailed observation, a figure that, if it erred at all, was a shade, the merest shade, too 'voluptuous'. She was certainly no plumper than Mrs. Fulborne, but he was more aware of local feminine developments, though she was wearing a morning dress of dark material that did not throw her outline into high relief.

The lady, after a moment's hesitation, had come round the table and was now leaning a little against it, her hands behind her back, clasping the edge—a charming, almost girlish pose that nevertheless exhibited her figure to great advantage; but as she warmed

to her theme, she released her hands from their grip on the table and began to gesticulate with a mounting intensity.

Mr. Pickering did not understand a word of her speech. But if her language conveyed nothing to him, her expression, combined with her gestures and the tones of her rich voice, strongly affected his imagination. She was, he supposed, telling him all the story of her life and he filled in the details for himself. She was the child of stern parents who wished now in the culpable French way to marry her to some rich, elderly husband. Of course! There could be no doubt of it. He was not ordinarily an imaginative man and he could not, he was sure, have invented such an original story for himself. Somehow, by a kind of sympathetic telepathy, she was able to convey her meaning to him as surely as if he understood her every word. He even had a distinct mental image of her father's appearance—a rather stout man with a spade-beard. And when at the end of what had become towards the close an impassioned harangue, she took a couple of steps towards him, held out her hands and quite obviously asked him a direct and poignant question; he rose magnificently to the occasion.

'Ah! *Non!*' said Mr. Pickering sadly shaking his head.

Another question followed—the lift of her strongly-pencilled eyebrows, the gestures of her still outstretched hands, the anxious note in her voice all made it quite sure that she was asking another question.

Mr. Pickering did not like to repeat himself so this time he said 'Ah! *Oui!*'

The effect of that exceeded his expectations. Her

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face and her voice suddenly softened as if he had relieved her from some desperate anxiety, and she murmured something that unquestionably ended with the word '*Entrez*'.

But that was a little further than Mr. Pickering had been prepared to go. To enter a strange French apartment by the window—the means quite clearly indicated by her gesture—with the probability of being confronted at any moment by a justly incensed French father in a spade-beard, seemed to Mr. Pickering distinctly unwise.

'Oh, well, I don't know that I should quite like to do that,' he said in English.

Evidently she did not agree with him. Her manner and her extraordinarily voluble speech became urgent, authoritative. Perhaps he had made a mistake, after all. She might be in greater trouble, than he had supposed.

With a sudden access of courage, Mr. Pickering hoisted himself over the sill of the window and jumped into the room.

The lady's face instantly lighted with an expression of wonderful gratitude and relief. She quickly closed and fastened the casements behind him and then, by pulling a cord, drew a pair of tapestry curtains across the window.

Mr. Pickering had a horrible sensation of being trapped. He would have attempted a remonstrance, pulled back the curtains and re-opened the window, but the beautiful young lady was between him and his objective and she was talking again. Surely Bernhardt, herself, could not have more vividly expressed resentment, rising to a pitch of outraged, vindictive anger

that gave place in a moment, first to the deeps of despair, of renunciation; then to an effect of forced gaiety, the reckless gaiety of one who finally casts her bonnet over the windmills; and at the end to—he was not quite sure, but it appeared almost certain—to an admission of some kind of admiration for himself; possibly for his unexampled bravery in daring to enter her father's private apartment and risking the explosion of his just wrath. Indeed, at this point, the lady came close to Mr. Pickering, laid her hands on his shoulders and bowed her head on his chest.

She had evidently been to the coiffeur's quite recently and her wonderfully waved hair smelt deliciously of scent.

Mr. Pickering would have given a year's salary to be able to tell her in comprehensible French that he was willing to be an elder brother to her; or, still better perhaps, an uncle.

He supposed that there was nothing to do now but await her father's entrance and carry the affair off as best he could. Possibly her father would understand English, in which case he would first explain exactly what had happened and then venture some remonstrance against the system of French marriages.

But it now became apparent that the lady had other plans in view. She released her hold of him, stepped back with an air of great confidence, and said something that undoubtedly ended with '*taxi, de suite*'. And then, as he did not at once respond to that, she took him by the hand, led him out of the room, preceded him across the hall and indicated the front door; talking all the time in a persuasive voice that she did not attempt to lower.

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There could be no question, Mr. Pickering inferred that her father was out and that she wanted him to get her a taxi. But was he justified in aiding her to run away from home like this? Why could she not have gone out and found a taxi for herself; or asked him to get her one through the window? French women were even more inexplicable than their English sisters. They were, also, more beautiful.

'All right, my dear, I'll risk it!' he said; and there must have been some remarkable *rapproch* between them, for she understood him at once, clapped her hands joyfully, blew him a kiss, and ran out of the hall.

'Lord only knows what you may be letting yourself in for, my boy,' Mr. Pickering cautioned himself as he fumbled with the unfamiliar latch of the front door.

His one hesitation, at the moment, was due to his ignorance of the particular brand of taxi demanded by the beautiful young woman whom he was helping to run away from her parents. She had insisted upon a '*taxi de suite*' and he wondered if that were another phrase for some kind of '*taxi de luxe*'. If he had seen the words '*toute de suite*' printed in a play of Molière's, he would have mentally translated it as 'at once' without the least hesitation or difficulty.

His perplexity with regard to the precise type of vehicle required was, however, instantly dismissed when, on emerging from the front door, he saw a taxi setting down a passenger on the other side of the road. Mr. Pickering realised in that moment that his true vocation was that of a man of action. He caught the driver's eye, beckoned to him, re-entered the hall, leaving the door wide open behind him, and made straight for the door through which the lady had dis-

appeared a minute earlier. He had his fingers on the handle when it was opened from within to disclose the lady hugging a cloak about her, but still without her hat.

When she found Mr. Pickering on the threshold or what he saw at a glance was a very elaborately furnished bedroom, her eyes danced and she released one hand from her cloak to waggle a finger at him in mock disapproval. Mr. Pickering, however, misread that gesture—construing it as one of playful reproof for having called the wrong kind of taxi, his choice being now in full view before the open front door.

But evidently it was not a matter of great importance, for the lady made straight for it with a kind of wriggling run, that held a strong suggestion of enjoying a piece of daring mischief, climbed in, and beckoned to Mr. Pickering to join her. No doubt, she wished to thank him.

‘Now, look here, my dear young lady——’ Mr. Pickering began, speaking in a clear and loud voice, but he was not permitted to get any further.

‘*Montez, montez,*’ the lady demanded, adding in the same breath many other things that Mr. Pickering could not make head or tail of; but very clearly pointing her meaning at the same time by laying hold of the lapel of his coat and pulling him towards her with quite remarkable vigour.

‘But——’ Mr. Pickering protested.

The lady interrupted him with something that it was not difficult to interpret as an urgent command to hurry. Her eyes were full of laughter, the pull on his coat was forcing him into a most undignified attitude, the taxi-driver had turned round on his box and was

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openly grinning; Mr. Pickering decided that his protest had better be made inside the taxi. He got in, the lady pulled to the door behind him, called out 'Bezons' in a very clear voice, and they were off—presumably to 'Bezons', though in what quarter of Paris that might be, Mr. Pickering had no idea.

They turned back into the Avenue Marceau, which they mounted in the direction opposite to that in which lay the safety of the pension in the Avenue de la Bourdonnais; quickly emerging into a large open circus in the middle of which, Mr. Pickering recognised the looming mass of the Arc de Triomphe. He had a notion that this monument was not far from the Bois de Boulogne, but after a long detour to the right round the circus, the taxi sped into another avenue three roads wide, and brilliantly lighted, which at first he imagined might be the Champs Elysées. It was not until they came to a kind of barrier, and the driver of the taxi halted by a little hut, called out a number and received some kind of ticket, that Mr. Pickering realised that their destination lay outside the city of Paris.

He turned to the lady who had not spoken since they started and was leaning back in her corner of the taxi, still hugging her cloak about her. 'Where are we going?' he asked, speaking gravely and slowly and taking great care to separate his words. The lady giggled and shook her head.

Mr. Pickering searched his memory for a suitable phrase from Molière and decided to try a very familiar quotation: '*Qu'est-ce que vous allez faire dans cette galère?*' His pronunciation was abominable, but she understood him, clapped her hands gleefully and

replied at length. Unfortunately Mr. Pickering was no wiser when she had finished.

He looked out and found that they were crossing a river which could be no other than the Seine, though how it had got there, seeing that to the best of his knowledge they had been travelling in a perfectly straight line directly away from it, he was at a loss to imagine. But it was quite certain now that they were leaving Paris behind them. This road of scattered houses was hardly worth the name of a suburb. They were going right out into the country. Heaven only knew where. To Belgium, perhaps? It might be that in Belgium she could escape from her parents' jurisdiction? But surely the driver would not have calmly accepted the order to drive into Belgium without offering some remonstrance? In any case, Mr. Pickering had no intention of being landed in Belgium or anywhere else in charge of a young and exceedingly attractive lady, and without a particle of luggage. Besides, he had his meeting to attend, next morning.

'Look here!' he began firmly, turning back to his companion, but at the same moment she leaned forward with her finger to her lips. '*Ecoutez!*' she said in a low, thrilling voice. Mr. Pickering recognised the word, and obediently listened. All that he could hear was the rather distant hooting of a car, apparently coming up behind them.

'It's only . . .' he tried, and stopped, searching his memory for the French for motor-car, a word that does not appear in Molière.

But before he found it, a very soft, warm hand was laid on his mouth, and then the lady rose and leaned far out of the window on her side of the taxi. She stayed

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there for quite a minute, it seemed to Mr. Pickering, before she suddenly subsided again into her corner, apparently in a condition of almost breathless mirth. '*Mon Dieu; c'est lui!*' she gasped. '*Oh, la, la!*'

Mr. Pickering lifted the flap, looked out behind and was momentarily blinded by the glaring headlights of a big car coming up after them at a terrific speed. The horn was sounding continuously with an effect of authoritative protest, though the taxi had already slackened pace and drawn close in to the side of the road.

'*C'est lui!*' The meaning of the phrase leapt suddenly to Mr. Pickering's mind. 'It's him!' Her father, of course. And even if he spoke English, it might now be rather difficult, Mr. Pickering reflected, to explain his action in an altogether convincing and satisfactory manner.

He dropped the flap and looked at his companion. She was holding her cloak over her mouth, now, but her eyes were laughing; and it came to Mr. Pickering with a sense of immense conviction that if she were compelled to make the choice between sacrificing him or herself, she would have no hesitation in laying the blame for the whole episode upon him. And he could not contradict her; could not defend himself. He would not know what she had said.

An angry, a very imperious, voice was calling to the driver to stop, and the taxi pulled up with a jerk. Mr. Pickering reluctantly turned his head and found himself faced with a very strange and terrifying object, nothing less than the open end of a small bright tube pointing immediately at his face, with a brown, muscular hand behind it, attached by a very solid-looking

arm to the shoulder of a man who had drawn his car close up alongside the taxi, and with his left hand still on the steering-wheel, was leaning far enough over to hold the muzzle of his revolver within a foot of Mr. Pickering's face.

Mr. Pickering did not move; but never in all his life had he felt less like Napoleon. His eyes had travelled very slowly from the revolver to the hand, the arm, the shoulder, the chest of his unknown antagonist, before they rested at last on his face. He was not wearing a spade beard, and he looked young to have so grown-up a daughter. Mr. Pickering had a sense of thinking with immense clearness and rapidity, and of being painfully anxious to avoid looking down the barrel of the revolver. He rather wished that it would go off and get the affair finished. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that the taxi-driver had got down from his seat on the near side and was standing between the two cars, lighting a cigarette. How callous these Frenchmen were; but assassinations of this kind were quite common in France, of course.

It seemed to Mr. Pickering that he had been sitting there, expecting the revolver to go off every moment, for quite a considerable time, when a voice behind him suddenly said, in a firm, authoritative tone: 'Victor!'

The muzzle of the revolver wobbled slightly and then, to Mr. Pickering's enormous relief, was abruptly lowered. He became aware at the same instant, of an overwhelming desire to talk, an immense passionate longing to explain everything in English at enormous length. And yet, until now, he had always been a very silent man.

But the opportunity to relieve himself of all that was

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singing in his mind was denied to him. A determined hand was laid on his chest, he was thrust violently back into the taxi, the abducted lady pushed past him, and descending into the road, addressed herself to the owner of the big car.

It was she who did the talking. Mr. Pickering had already had some slight experience of her virtuosity, but on this occasion she eclipsed herself. From first to last, Mr. Pickering failed to make any sense of her actual words, but the general purport of them was not difficult to guess. She was devoting herself exclusively it seemed, to remonstrance and abuse; more particularly abuse. It was not, perhaps, the attitude that even Mr. Pickering would have anticipated from a well-trained young Frenchwoman to her father; but there could be no doubt of it. In the taxi, she had laughed when she became aware of the pursuit; now, she was, beyond all question, furiously, vindictively angry. And never once did she hesitate for a word. She gesticulated with extraordinary freedom and some grace, she climbed on to the step of the car and got down again, she flung herself back against the side of the taxi; she did everything except prostrate herself on the muddy road; but never for a single moment did the amazing stream of her language pause. It rose and fell; but it never faltered. The sound of her voice was as the sound of a mighty torrent that nothing could check.

And the man in the car did not attempt to interrupt her. Sometimes he leaned back in his driver's seat, sometimes he shrugged his shoulders, once or twice he wiped his forehead; but he said never a word until the lady suddenly opened the door of the car, jumped in

beside him and pointed to the road ahead. Then, as he let in the clutch, he lifted his head, took off his cap to Mr. Pickering, and said, apparently to the driver of the taxi: '*Voilà un homme brave!*'

As the car leapt into the darkness, the sound of the lady's unceasing voice softly faded together with the drumming of the engine.

Mr. Pickering became aware of a vast and grateful silence.

And then came what was surely the strangest happening of that amazing adventure, for the silence was broken by the sound of cockney speech.

'Oh! well; sooner 'im than me, any day.'

Mr. Pickering started, although he had not started when confronted with the muzzle of the revolver.

The driver of the taxi, seated on the step of his own vehicle, was thoughtfully lighting a fresh cigarette.

'Do you speak English?' Mr. Pickering asked.

'English born and bred'; the chauffeur replied; 'though I've 'ardly been out of France since 1914.'

Mr. Pickering hesitated for a moment, and then posed the essential question that was burning in his mind. 'Was that her father in the car?' he asked.

The chauffeur took a deep breath of cigarette smoke, and blew it out slowly and contemplatively into the night before he said, 'No, nor yet it wasn't 'er gran'father neither.'

Mr. Pickering pondered that for a few seconds before he continued: 'But what did she say about me?'

'Well, so far as I could make out'; the driver said; 'she took you on, because you 'appened to turn up at the lucky moment. The other feller, as perhaps you know, 'adn't come to fetch 'er as 'e'd promised.'

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'No, I didn't know that,' Mr. Pickering put in.

'Oh! well, he was a couple of 'ours be'ind 'is appointment, it seems, and she opened the window to wait for 'im, and was prostrate with grief, fair dyin' of a broken 'eart and all that; when you turned up. And then in despair, you know, she yielded to your pressing solicitations—that's 'ow she put it—and consented to run off with you—though you wouldn't 'a got away with it, apparently, seein' as she was takin' you to 'er mother's 'ouse at Bezons. I wouldn't go so far as to say, mark you, that the other feller *believed* all she said. Shouldn't be far out in guessing as it very likely wasn't the first time 'e'd 'ad trouble with 'er; and once or twice I wasn't sure whether 'e 'adn't got a mind to leave 'er with it. 'Owever, take it from me, you're well out of that, though she was a good-looking piece right enough.'

'Yes,' Mr. Pickering agreed. 'Very good-looking.'

The driver stood up and stretched himself. 'But you can't never judge people by the looks of 'em'; he remarked. 'For instance, you're a quiet-lookin' gentleman as ever I come across. Who'd ever a' thought as you'd 'a leapt in through a window and persuaded a woman like that to run off with you, out of 'and, as you might say?'

'No,' Mr. Pickering admitted, and then added: 'But I suppose that—er—little adventures of this kind are not at all uncommon in Paris?'

'Well, no; not in a way of speakin' they aren't,' agreed the taxi-driver. ' 'Owever, can't stay 'ere all night. Where d'you want to go now sir?'

For a moment Mr. Pickering hesitated on the verge of saying 'The Moulin Rouge'. In his present exalted

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frame of mind the gesture tempted him. But he reflected that it must be getting very late, and that he had his meeting next day, so he prudently substituted 'The Avenue de la Bourdonnais'.

'Right oh!' assented the driver cheerfully, mounting to his seat.

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Mr. Banks had been right in saying that taxis were cheap in Paris; and the sixty-five francs which the driver suggested as being a fair price, without troubling to consult his taximeter, seemed to Mr. Pickering so uncommonly reasonable that he demanded no change from the hundred-franc note that he tendered in payment. It was thus that heroes comported themselves; and maintained their reputation for courage and gallantry.

Mr. Banks was just going up to bed as Mr. Pickering entered the pension. 'So you went to a show after all?' he said.

'In a way, yes'; Mr. Pickering replied.

'Seems to have bucked you up a bit'; Mr. Banks remarked. 'You look mighty pleased with yourself.'

'It's the air of Paris'; Mr. Pickering explained. And when he got home, he meant to marry Mrs. Fulbourne. But he said nothing of that to Mr. Banks.

THE GAMBLER



‘I PREFER not to play cards for money,’ he said. I had half suspected that, when I had noticed him in the Casino, standing by the tables and watching the players. There had been something wistful in his attitude, something, I thought, of regret in his eyes. But Fenchurch who was sick of roulette—Fenchurch liked a game in which you ‘could use your head’—had begged me to ask the stranger to make a fourth at bridge. ‘I know he’s a pretty useful player,’ he said. ‘I saw him looking on, the other night, and he nearly cried when Mrs. Atkinson-Smith missed a rather pretty coup. It wasn’t very obvious but I saw it, and I’ll swear he did, too.’

And although there was no ostentation about him, we knew that he must be rich. He would not have been staying at the Hôtel de Paris if he had not been, and he did himself pretty well, too. Also, Ernesto, the head-waiter, had spoken of him with an air of great respect as being ‘very generous’.

‘That surprises you?’ he asked, as I paused with a feeling that I ought to apologise.

‘Yes’; I admitted; ‘it does. Unless, of course . . .’

He watched me with a rather amused smile as I paused at the edge of hazarding a guess.

‘Unless?’ he prompted me.

‘Well, unless you’ve been rather badly bitten, or something of the kind.’

His smile broadened. 'You believe that that would cure a man of gambling?' he asked.

'It might,' I said.

His shake of the head pitied my youth and inexperience. 'Let me tell you why not,' he said, offering me one of the best cigars I have ever smoked. 'But perhaps you would sooner play bridge?'

I assured him that I would infinitely prefer to hear his story.

He smiled that friendly, amused smile of his again. 'I will tell it to you because you are interested'; he said. 'Not as a warning; because you know nothing of the gambler's spirit. To you, roulette or baccarat are merely rather uninteresting games of chance, and like your friend Mr. Fenchurch, you prefer a game in which you can match your brains against those of an antagonist. We others ...'

He made a little foreign gesture with his hands to express the unbridgeable gulf that separated those two categories, before he continued: 'My father was one of the richest men in Italy; and my mother's family, also, were wealthy. I inherited at one time and another more than a million pounds of your English money, for I was the last of my generation on both sides of the family. But even in boyhood, I had developed the passion of a gambler. I was sent to school in England because my father believed I should have less opportunity to gamble there. But in England there is always horse-racing, and one who had my madness, truly it was a form of madness, could find or make an opportunity. I was expelled from my school—never mind the name of it, it is too well-known—for betting. Later I was sent down from Oxford for the

same fault. And when I returned home my father was dead.

'I inherited a very large sum of money from him, besides the title and lands. It was the money that went first; the greater part of it at the Casino here. After that the land. Then as luck would have it, I inherited another little fortune from my father's sister; and after that still another from my mother's family. In all I lost five separate fortunes that came to me. When they were all gone, I sold the title. It can be done in Italy, by arrangement.'

He paused a few moments there, looking straight out before him with an expression that seemed to me to be still one of a pathetic regret rather than of contempt for his mad youth. But when he began again, he turned to me and laid his exquisitely white, aristocratic hand on my arm. 'You must be thinking,' he said, 'that I was a very unskilled gambler; rash, impetuous, empty-headed? You are wrong. I played with my head as far as it is possible to do so at roulette. I tried systems. Also, I am not ashamed to confess that I was almost insanely superstitious. But—ah! it is almost incredible that "but"—I was cursed with luck which I believe must constitute what you English call a "record". It was amazing, unique. Others who have hit the "veine", win sometimes. They have their good days now and again, to encourage them. I? Never! *I always lost*. I happened to be that unfortunate individual who represents the extreme case. In the doctrine of chances, such individuals must exist. Obvious, is it not?'

'And then?' I whispered, breathlessly.

'And then we come to the evening of the 13th of

February, 1903'; he went on slowly, savouring the utterance of the date as if, to him, it had a peculiar significance. 'I had precisely one hundred francs left in the world, and debts amounting to, perhaps, a hundred thousand. There were no more fortunes to come to me. I had no further resources. When that hundred francs was gone there was but one thing left for me to do. I had kept my revolver. It was the only piece of realisable property that still remained to me. I went into the Casino, and put my hundred francs, *en plein*, on the number 13.'

He paused so long there that I had time to imagine half a dozen romantic endings to his story—the attempted suicide—the intervener—some old friend of the family—a woman—or the misfiring of the revolver and the sudden realisation of the terror of death.

'And what happened after that?' I prompted him at last.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I won'; he said simply. 'The luck had turned. As I have said I was the exceptional individual. Since that evening I have always won. I have won more than I originally lost. The only thing lost to me is the title which I have been unable to repurchase.'

'And now you don't play any more, for fear . . .' I suggested.

His smile once again pitied my youth and ignorance. 'For fear,' he repeated. 'Truly not. There is no fear. I know for certain that I shall win whenever I play. And when a man knows that he cannot gamble. It is such a bore.'

VERITY



St. Moritz, 1919.

MY DEAR HUBERT,
Your letter has filled me with despair, and if I, now, proceed to reply at a length that will dismay you when you open the imposingly large envelope that I shall require, I do it far more for my sake than for yours. Because, my dear boy, your letter is unanswerable. You say that you have written a play and that the manager to whom you have read it was 'almost enthusiastic', but told you that only Verity Lane could play the part of your heroine. And you write to me as the person most likely to be able to answer you, inquiring with a charming ingenuousness if there is any chance of her returning to the stage. You need not have added that you never knew her. That was a safe inference from your question.

Again; 'Was she really so wonderful?' you ask, a question that you put to me in the accent of the new school of drama. I can equally well picture either you, or one of your contemporaries, alertly posing a criticism of Rachel or of Mrs. Siddons in much the same tone: 'After all, was she really so wonderful?' you might say with the doubt of a new generation reflecting on the conceits and boasting of those who had 'known Joseph'.

Well, I can assure you that she *was* wonderful, as a woman, wonderful and mysterious. She had what we

call 'genius', but she could not convincingly express her genius in any art, unless it were the art of living. She acted, painted, wrote, sang, played the violin; and she did all these things better than the average performer. She could have made a living as a painter, author, or musician; but she was mistress of none of these arts. When the mood was on her, she excelled; but the mood never lasted long enough to enable her to produce a masterpiece.

She always spoke of herself as a 'freak', and would begin by explaining that she owed nothing to heredity—which, so far as one could see, was perfectly true. She was the youngest of five children. Her father was (still is) a partner in a not too flourishing firm of solicitors, and neither he nor her mother was in any way distinguishable from the great crowd of middle-class dwellers that inhabit the suburbs of London. They were simple, commonplace people, the undistinguished descendants of undistinguished ancestors; and four of their children, Verity's brother and her three sisters, are admirable expressions of what one might anticipate from such a union. The eldest sister I knew well. She is nine years older than Verity and the only one of the family who has never married. She found her place in life when Verity returned from the Antipodes and went on the stage, by devoting herself to her sister, serving her with an adoration that had in it a quality almost tragic. Hers was the worship that mediocrity sometimes pays to genius. To Susan West, Verity was something more than a human being.

If you wish to study Verity's record at the High School in North London at which she was educated, you must look for her baptismal name of Marion

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Emily Louisa West. You will find, however, little to reward you. She was not a great prize-winner. In her schoolgirl days she had charm and temperament, and she was always getting into, and out of, hot-water; but she won no scholarships. The first indication we have of her coming genius is in her change of name.

It was on her fifteenth birthday that she made the announcement at breakfast; and the speech which heralded her re-baptism was a little remarkable in the mouth of a girl of fifteen, though twenty years of repetition may possibly have endowed it with a form and substance that were only suggested in the original. 'I am tired,' she said, or so the tradition runs, 'of being sometimes Marion *or* Emily *or* Louisa, I want to be myself. In future, please, I want you to call me Verity. Doesn't that mean The Truth?'

Regarded as an isolated record of her precocity, this speech of hers would be almost negligible. But in the light of the decision she made nearly twenty years later, I cannot doubt that she was inspired by a great flash of illumination in which she momentarily touched the condition of mind she afterwards reached through bitter experience. In some way, she must have known, even at fifteen, whither her life was tending.

After that comes darkness again. She was working in her father's office as a stenographer when, at the age of nineteen, she met, and all too precipitately married, a certain Hubert Lane. I know nothing about him, and the only reason we have for supposing that Verity's married life on the other side of the world was unhappy is that she never spoke of it, nor of her husband, when she returned, as a widow, after seven years of exile. She had one child, a daughter, born a year after her

marriage; a rather stodgy, uninteresting girl! Isn't it queer how these things go; as if a familiar process should turn out a masterpiece which cannot be repeated?

I was not in love with Verity in the old days. If I was, I did not know it. I am fifteen years older than she is, and in her girlhood those fifteen years immensely separated us. Once, only—it can have been but a few days before she met Hubert Lane—did a sort of wonder stir in me concerning her. We had been playing tennis at the same club, though not in the same set, one Saturday afternoon, and I spoke to her and her two sisters just as we were leaving. I remember nothing of that conversation. It was probably the cheerful interchange touched by a suggestion of persiflage, proper to such occasions. But after we had said 'Good-bye', Verity turned and looked at me with a sudden interest in her eyes. It was as if for the first time she had become aware of me as an individual, and had at the same moment revealed something of herself. And in that instant I realised an unusual quality in her. She was different, I decided, from all the other young women I knew; and I determined to see her again, soon, and talk to her. But I did not see her again for more than seven years.

I was in business in those days, had to go to Birmingham for my firm on the following Monday, and stayed there six weeks. When I returned Verity was married and had already sailed for South Africa.

I often thought of her in that long interval. She had become isolated in my mind, set apart from all the other women I had ever met. But I had no feeling of jealousy with regard to that unknown man who was her husband. Her attraction for me had not, at that time,

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any physical quality. I thought of her always—thus giving her a separate place in my imagination—as ‘the girl with the soul’. I apologise for the apparent implications of this distinction, but they are apparent only, not real. I conferred the title on her as other men confer the title of Queen on the loved woman. To me, she was unique, by reason of that quality of immortality I found in her.

The first intimation that I had of her return to England was the sight of her name on a poster. After my marriage, I went to live in Lancaster Gate and I had neither seen nor heard from the Wests for five or six years. I had never known any of them at all intimately. They were, as I have said, uninteresting people.

* * *

It is three days since I paused at this point, my dear Hubert, and wrote to you saying that so far as I knew there was not the least likelihood of Miss Lane’s return to the stage. I might have sent to you at the same time these somewhat inconsecutive notes concerning her origins and life up to the age of twenty-six. But I see, now, and it was the realisation that made me pause, how unlikely it is I shall ever send you the rest of the story. Nevertheless, I shall continue to address you, for two reasons. The first is that I must imagine a listener, and already I have come to picture your quiet sympathy and to find encouragement in it. The second reason is that you knew all the story of my miserable marriage and in writing to you I need waste no time in defending myself. You, at least, will acquit me of the barest suspicion of spiritual unfaithfulness that may seem to taint the continuation of my story.

VERITY

I was at a fairly low ebb, spiritually, on that Spring morning of 1909 when I caught sight of the name of Verity Lane hailing me like a portent from the fascia of a motor 'bus. It was high May, a day of summer heat, and I was turning into Hyde Park seeking refuge from life and myself in the enjoyment of the clean, ardent foliage that one can find in London only at this season.

In the mood of that moment, a mood that I can all too easily recall even as I sit here among the mountains, I was willing to believe that that name was nothing more than a hallucination. I sat for an hour or more, warming my body in the lovely sunlight and my spirit with a fantasy in which an etherealised Verity came as a guardian angel to uphold and comfort me. I had not asked Heaven for a sign, but a sign, so I romantically imagined, had been given to me. But, indeed, the reality was little like my dream.

For as I left the Park I saw the name again, and a third time before I had crossed the Bayswater Road. And when I took up *The Times* after lunch, I found further repetitions—and an explanation. 'Miss' Verity Lane, who, as I learned now for the first time, had already won her laurels in Melbourne and Sydney and Cape Town, was come to take London by storm.

I was frankly disappointed. This was not my dream of her. The girl with a soul had been changed by evil enchantment into a successful actress, 'the admired of three continents', as one enthusiastic critic put it. At first I had a doubt whether this could be the same woman I had known at Highbury, but a biographical notice I found in one journal disposed of that question. Two other facts, I learned from the same source were

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that her husband was dead, and that she had served her apprenticeship to the stage by years of hard struggle. I decided to go and see her act that very evening, and fate ordained that I should get a seat—a stall returned at the last moment as I was disconsolately turning away from the box-office.

The play was a poor thing and is long since forgotten, but it gave Verity an introduction to the London theatre by displaying the versatility of her talent. There were both tragedy and comedy in her part and she made the best of the rather poor material. An impulse made me send up my card to her at the end of the second act; I wanted to see if the Verity of my dream had any existence outside my own imagination. I could see no sign of her on the stage—in that play. Also, I wished to see if by any chance she remembered me, though I had to admit that there was no reason why she should, and I had a strange thrill of pleasure when the attendant handed me a pencil note. I had just time to read it before the lights went down. She had invited me to go up to her dressing-room at the next interval.

I suppose I must have been dreaming again as I followed the attendant up and down those dingy stone stairs. I know that it was a shock to me when I was greeted, in the sudden glare of the dressing-room, by a caricature of the woman I had seen on the stage—parodied, now, by my near sight of the grease paint. Something, too, of the character she had been playing lingered about her as she jumped up to greet me; an exaggeration of gesture and enunciation. I had, as it were, to look and speak through that appearance to the person I hoped to remember.

'Susan has been telling me all about you,' she said with an artificial brightness of manner; 'that you are married, and rich, and live in Lancaster Gate.'

'All that matters?' I mumbled, turning to greet Susan, who had emerged from some obscurity at the mention of her name with an effect of coming down stage. So it was, perhaps, Susan after all who had remembered me, and not Verity, I thought?

Whether Verity had changed or not I was unable as yet to guess, but her sister had definitely become in the interval a middle-aged woman. She had streaks of vivid white in her dark hair, a tress here and there, absolutely blanched, lying with a curious piebald suggestion against the dull blackness of her smooth head. A few of her eyelashes, too, were white—white as chalk.

'Where did you hear the news?' I asked, and she said something about having seen it 'in the papers', before Verity cut in with:

'But I remembered you, without that.'

'In spite of all your wanderings and adventures?' I asked, for the sake of saying something.

She had sat down again before the mirror and was re-touching her lips with a stick of vermilion. She might almost as well, I thought, have been in Australia; she was so far away from me.

'I remember,' she said, keeping her eyes fixed on her own image in the glass and punctuating her speech with touches of the lip-stick; 'saying good-bye to you . . . after tennis . . . at the club. . . . But perhaps you've forgotten that?'

'Hardly likely to forget that,' I muttered, 'the first time I ever saw you.'

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She let her vermilion fall with a faint click into the china tray before her, and swung round to face me.

‘I was never sure,’ she said. ‘But I’m glad: yes, in spite of everything, I’m glad.’

I could not reply to that, not there, speaking to the mask that so efficiently hid her.

I got up. ‘Can’t I come to see you on Sunday?’ I asked. ‘I would like just to *see* you again.’

‘But, of course,’ she said, dropping back into the manner of her part. ‘Come to tea. Give him the address, Susan. We’re not in the telephone book yet. I’ve only been over here eight weeks.’

I took the card that Susan offered me and bowed my good-bye. I did not want to touch that whitened hand again.

As I was going out of the theatre—I did not return to see the fourth act—I met young Lord Grayshott at the stage-door. I knew him slightly and we nodded to each other.

* * *

And Grayshott had arrived before me when I called at Verity’s flat on the following Sunday afternoon. And he outstayed me. It is impossible to think bitterly of him, now; but at that time I detested him for the very quality I can now admire—his endurance. Always he anticipated and outstayed me.

In many respects he was quite a commonplace young man. He was thirty, then; and the heir to an Earldom—although his father, Lord Berrystead, might be good for another twenty years. He, too, came occasionally to see Verity, and appeared to have no objection to his son’s suit. But no doubt Grayshott had shown his

quality to his own family, and they had realised that opposition would be futile. His was no common obstinacy. He was a man with rare powers of endurance, and, let me admit it, he loved Verity with a devotion that I have never seen equalled. *Respice finem.*

But, oh! how I hated him at that time! 'Our stolid William,' I used to call him, or 'William the Silent'. He had, indeed, to endure much acid banter from me, though he never seemed to resent it. For no one but Verity had any power to hurt him, and he never regarded me for one instant as a serious rival. I was married, and his blind faith in Verity was such that he believed my marriage to be an absolutely efficient bar.

He was right in one way, if for other reasons than those evolved from his conceptions of conventional British morality. For I did, eventually, make my full confession to Verity and her reply might very well have shocked Grayshott. She gave me the opportunity deliberately. She was in a serious mood just then, and she wanted, as she told me, 'to straighten out her life'. We went off in my car together, all alone, one Sunday—the first time in those twelve months that I had had her all to myself for more than a few minutes. We had lunch at Burford Bridge and afterwards found a solitude on the slopes of Box Hill.

I told her everything that afternoon and she listened without impatience, although nothing of all I said was new to her. What she had not known she had guessed—in some cases with quite astonishing insight. But at the end of it all, she shook her head.

'You know it would never do, dear,' she said. 'You are not that kind of man. You would lose your own

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self-esteem, and grieve and worry over it; and spoil our relations with each other. We are better as we are.'

'It isn't because you . . .' I began.

'No,' she said reflectively. 'I am a perfectly unmoral woman who has always lived what the world would call a perfectly moral life.'

I shook my head. 'You are not an unmoral woman,' I said.

'In a way I am,' she replied, 'the world's way. I don't care what people think or say about me. I would go off with anybody or commit a murder, if I thought that it would be good for me to do it.'

I do not think that I had hoped for, or expected, any answer other than the one she had given me; but I still passionately desired one vital re-assurance.

'I'm content, Verity,' I told her. 'It is your friendship, before all, that makes life worth living for me. But I couldn't bear it if you married Grayshott.'

I was perturbed by the doubt that came into her eyes when I said that; yes, and more than doubt—
anxiety, real distress. I had anticipated an easy repudiation of that suggestion.

'Would it make so much difference,' she asked, 'to us?' And then, recognising the futility of her own question, she went on, in the tone of one who ponders an explanation: 'He is so—steady.'

'He has asked you to marry him, then?' I said in a sudden agony.

She had been gazing out across the blue Surrey distances, but at that question she turned her head slowly and looked at me with a smile that fondly ridiculed my simplicity.

'Has he asked me?' she repeated, as though she

called the Heavens to witness; and added, 'I never could count, but how many days are there in a year?'

'He persecutes you?' I suggested, a trifle relieved by her answer. If he had, indeed, asked her, three hundred and sixty-five times, to marry him; she had, at least, refused him as many.

'Not with his questions so much as with his silences,' she said. 'And, really, I don't want to be loved that much. It's like—oh! it's like the South African *karoo*, illimitable, unchanging, unescapable!'

'Can't you send him away?' I said.

And again there was that look of gentle banter in her smile as she answered me. 'He won't go,' she said.

* * *

Nevertheless, I soon forgot the uneasiness that was temporarily aroused by that conversation. Nothing was changed by it. For a day or two, perhaps, my resentment burned more hotly against Grayshott, but I did not have to suffer the persecution of his silences and could not realise the slow, steady pressure they exerted. So with the natural tendency of the average mind to disregard or belittle unseen dangers, I settled down into the comfortable and fatuous belief that the relations of Verity, Grayshott, and myself would continue indefinitely, unchanged.

My spell of complacency was not broken until some ten months after that explanation on Box Hill. Verity had been on a short provincial tour, and the first intimation I received of the coming change was a brief paragraph in the theatrical news to the effect that Miss Verity Lane's promised production of *Magda* at the Lyric Theatre had been cancelled, but that no other

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announcement of her plans had been made. By the second post that morning—it was a Saturday—I had a short note from Verity asking me to come and see her in her flat in town the next afternoon.

I found her alone. Even Susan was not there; and for a moment I attributed some difference I immediately noticed in Verity to her unusual separation from the two figures that were so intimately associated with her in my mind. She had drawn the chesterfield close up to the fire, and when I came in hardly looked up as she beckoned me to come and sit beside her.

I had a question on my lips as to her change of plans, but she gave me no time to put it.

‘I listened patiently to you last year,’ she began at once; ‘and now I want you to listen—with all the patience you can—to me.’

I guessed at once that she was going to tell me of her engagement to Grayshott. I had not thought of that until I entered the room, but directly she spoke I had not a doubt, and the suggestion came to me with a kind of terrible staleness. It seemed to me as if we had done nothing but discuss the inadvisability of that marriage for months; though, indeed, it had not once been mentioned between us since that afternoon on Box Hill, nearly a year before.

She took my understanding for granted, and all her speech was of expiation.

‘I need his steadiness,’ she said. ‘He is so single-minded, whole, resolute. . . . His love for me has the sincerity of a religion. And I need it—I need it . . . I’m not a single person, I’m a multitude. I fled from the other arts one by one, to find hope in an art that would permit me to be a dozen people by turn. . . . That has

failed. I should have known that it would. I have not always the inclination to play—Magda, for example. And I go on the stage, loathing myself, because I can sink my identity in the character of such a woman as Magda—feel with her, think with her—while something inside me, something I have to suppress, is telling me that I ought to be a nun. . . .

‘I want to be whole, single, and I can’t. I want to straighten out my life and find—the truth, myself. He will help me to do that. I shall learn, I *will* learn, to love him as he loves me. I will take the position he wishes me to take; give him children, live a steady, resolute life. . . .

‘I realise all that I shall miss—all the delights of artistic creation; the joy of making or interpreting. It’s only that with me. . . . I’m sick of praise and admiration. What happiness can I find in another’s admiration when I don’t admire myself? And I know that I’m not, really, first-class, in anything. I’m lured from one thing to another, literature, music, painting, acting; but I’ve no mistress. I get my moments of delight, but they are nothing more than the dreams of the opium-eater.

‘I want to love, Adrian; I want to love somebody, some thing, desperately, whole-heartedly. If I can’t find myself, let me lose myself, utterly.’

She was, I saw, arguing not with me but with herself, desperately flitting here and there in the hope of discovering the final extenuation. And as she talked, it seemed to me that I saw, clearly and unmistakeably, the fatal objection to her hope of either finding or losing herself in a marriage with Grayshott.

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'Verity, my dear,' I began quietly, but she would not allow me to speak.

She turned quickly towards me and gripped my wrist with a slim, violent hand. 'Don't, Adrian, don't!' she said. 'It's too late.'

'Too late?' I repeated, feeling suddenly cold and abject.

'I married him yesterday morning, in Manchester, by special licence,' she said.

Her eyes held mine for a moment with a look that revealed the same virgin soul I had seen nine years before by the gate of the tennis-courts; and I knew that already she had realised her mistake.

History is an account of the actions and not of the inner lives of individuals, and just in so far as I attempt a *history* of Verity's life I shall fail to illuminate those actions of hers which taken by themselves tell us nothing of her real self.

Looking back now to that Sunday afternoon, I can wonder how after her tacit, but to me completely revealing, admission, she could have been blind enough to persist in the error she had made—how she could have imagined that she could ever make a success of her life as Lady Grayshott? It is easy to be logical in retrospect, when the whole chain of events can be seen as an orderly sequence. At the moments when we make our great decisions we are swayed, not by logic, but by little obstinacies and determinations, by emotions and—Hope.

Verity's life for the next three years must have been shot by an astonishing flicker of moods, but outwardly she maintained the resolution that was the dominant effect of her when she made her avowal to me. She

meant to resign herself, to lose ambition in self-sacrifice, to find satisfaction and contentment in devotion to her husband. And while it is easy for me to say, now, that she could never have done that, it must have seemed possible to her at the time.

I saw her once in the midst of her resolutions. It was about fifteen months after her marriage, and she asked me down for a week-end at 'Pinewood'. I saw no reason why I should not accept. I was weak for another sight of her; and my own misery seemed, then, to be no nearer a termination than it had been at any moment since my poor, unfortunate wife had become an imbecile, a few weeks after our marriage.

I had no private conversation with Verity in the course of that week-end. She was in no mood for the giving of confidences, even to me. Nor did she permit me a single opportunity to catch sight of the soul behind her eyes. Her soul, I inferred, was being severely disciplined; confined, hidden. It was not permitted a moment's freedom. She hid it as if it were something of which she were ashamed. She had given up all the Arts. I heard her say once in a clear, determined voice that music, painting, and literature had lost much of their attraction for her. She appeared to be modelling herself on the example of her mother-in-law, Lady Berrystead—a calm, intent, stupid woman who sincerely believed that the English aristocracy was a people distinct and apart from the rest of humanity. Lady Berrystead's idea of Heaven must, I think, have been of a society confined to a carefully selected list of names from Debrett. She might have admitted the possibility of including a few Bishops.

I, like a fool, went home to grieve over the death of

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Verity. I counted her as dead, so blind are we to the great truths of life. Nevertheless, I may be forgiven for not foreseeing the manner of her release.

* * *

It seems to me now as if I must have been present at that last scene between Verity and her husband, though, indeed, I was a thousand miles away. I was up in the Hebrides, seeking any kind of distraction from the thought that my life was empty, bitter, useless. My poor, unhappy wife had died some two months before. I had nothing left to occupy me; and though I had often longed for release from that duty of attendance upon her to which I had sworn myself, I missed the discipline it had imposed upon me.

And Verity and her husband were in a villa at Cannes. They had been married nearly three years and no child had come to give her a last, desperate hope of maintaining the resolution she had so determinedly made.

She did not in any sense 'break out', she told me, She neither felt nor pretended to any passionate resentment against the life she was living. But suddenly—as if, she said, she had walked out of the glare of a ball-room into the light of a cold, grey sunrise—she knew that she could not go on. She knew that her life with Grayshott was over, finished; although, as yet, she had no conception of what lay before her.

She told her husband at once, clearly, coldly. 'I have tried to love you,' she said. 'I have devoted three years to trying to love you, and now I am certain that I never can. We must separate. I am awake again.'

He made no remonstrance. He spoke only once. 'I

know,' he said quietly, as if she had told him that she was going out for a walk. And then he left the room, went straight upstairs, and shot himself.

I do not believe that there was any resentment in him, or that he had any thought beyond the overwhelming desire to get out of his misery. He, like Verity, had reached a point beyond which he realised that he could not 'go on'.

She heard the shot and had not a moment's doubt as to its import. 'I was so cold,' she said. 'I had no feeling. I felt as if it were all happening to somebody else; to the Marion Emily Louisa West who sat rigid on a sofa in the drawing-room just staring—staring at something I could not see. Indeed, I knew nothing about her, what she saw or felt or heard. I merely watched and waited.'

Then Grayshott's friend, Ashburnham, came stumbling horror-struck into the drawing-room, and began, lamely, ineptly, to try to tell her what had happened.

She never moved. She sat like an artificial figure staring at nothing. All she could do, at last, was to repeat her husband's final words to her.

'I know,' she said.

* * *

Sensibility was returning very slowly to her shocked, numb soul, when she came to see me at my house in the middle of June, nearly three months after that tragedy. She came unannounced by any letter. I had no idea that she was even in England.

'Can Miss Verity Lane see you,' was the message that the butler brought up.

'I had to come. I was so lonely,' were her first words

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when we were alone. After that she told me all the story of her life with Grayshott. 'It haunts me,' she said at the end of it, and added, 'I don't know what to do. There's a curtain between me and the future. I live from one minute to the next. I can't think.'

She was sitting by me on the chesterfield and she checked my answer by laying her hand on my wrist. 'Not yet,' she went on. 'I haven't finished. I want you to know first what seems to be coming up in me. You may understand it better than I do—I, who cannot see, just now, one hour into the future. Listen! I began to write yesterday; just two little worthless verses, that's all. But it came from inside me.. Tell me if you can understand what it means—for me.'

And then in her beautiful voice, and with an emotion that filled her verse with a deep and thrilling intensity, she recited:

*'The everlasting night shall fall
On this poor flesh, when comes the call
For that last journey;
And I, the lonely I, shall fare
With none to cloak me, none to share
Reproach or guerdon.*

*'Shall then this body I have known,
A slim, submerged, white anchor-stone,
Moor and restrain me;
Weighting the soul that would aspire,
With sense of love and old desire
Unconsummated?'*

I had no doubt, then, either for her or for myself.

'It means,' I said, 'that you are seeking yourself, seeking the truth.'

I expected her assent. I had spoken out of the depths of my being and had had no question in my mind but that she would agree with me. Instead of that, she suddenly, passionately, revolted.

'No, Adrian. No! I can't,' she cried out as though I had uttered a sentence of banishment upon her. 'I want to love—someone, who understands.'

She was looking at me with a deep and wonderful question in her eyes as she went on. 'It must be you! It can only be you. You've always understood.'

I made no attempt to resist her. I took her in my arms, for the first time in my life, and held her close to me. She rested there for a long, long moment with a deep sigh of satisfaction, before she looked up at me and said, 'You will always worship me, Adrian?'

'Until death,' I said; and with that it was as if she collapsed in my arms. Her body became limp, and unresponsive. She slipped from me and crouched in a heap on the floor at my feet, her face hidden in her hands.

'Verity,' I besought her.

'I'm haunted,' It was only a whisper, but I caught it quite clearly. 'Haunted! Why did you say that? It wasn't you speaking; it was him. That's what *he* always said—his very words. 'Until death' . . . and he did. He loved me until death—and beyond. He's here, now, and he wants me still, with all his old obstinacy . . . I daren't marry you, Adrian. Not yet. He would come between us. Whenever you kissed me, I should feel *his* lips, *his* arms.'

She got up, then, with an effort of determination.

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'You were right, Adrian,' she said, looking down at me. 'I must find myself first; find the truth.'

She moved away quickly, before I could find the magic word that would hold her.

She spoke only once again, turning as she reached the door and silencing my first attempt to appeal to her by a gesture of fine authority.

'I shall come back,' she said.

That was five years ago and I am still waiting for her. In those years the world has altered. She left me in June 1914. Since then, through all the vast stir and tragedy of the war, I have heard no word of her.

But I know that she will keep her promise; that one day I shall see her again. And it may be that if she has found what she went out to seek, I may become not her husband but her disciple.

I shall be more than content.

TOPS AND BOTTOMS



‘YOU’D ’ardly think now, would you,’ said Mr. Williams, ‘that I was connected with the ’ighest in the land?’

I should certainly never have guessed it. As the chief grocer in a small provincial town, he might very well, I imagined, be doing quite comfortably, and putting by money. I could see him on local councils, and even as Mayor; but I could not see him connected with the highest in the land.

‘No? Really?’ I encouraged him politely, concealing, I hope, the least shadow of scepticism.

‘Quite a romance, eh?’ Mr. Williams continued, with an air of settling down to enjoy himself. ‘Seein’ as you’re a writer.’ I’m not sure as I ought to tell you—not private family ’istories, touchin’ as I’ve ’inted—well, you can guess ’oo. But I depen’ on you to treat anythin’ I may say as strickly privit. Besides which you might get yourself into trouble in a way of speakin’.

‘I ought to tell you to begin with as I wasn’t so bad lookin’ as a young man; twenty-five year ago we’ll say. I’ll be fifty-one at Michaelmas. Well set-up an’ I ’adn’t got fat then. Also, I was somethin’ of a catch, so to speak. My father ’ad this business before me an’ ’adn’t done so bad at it. Me elder brother’d enlisted; and died o’ fever in the Bore War; and me prospects all round was middlin’ snug as you might say. Well, well, I s’pose I ain’t the poorest man in the town by a

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long chalk. 'Owever, to come to the point, what must I do but fall in love above me station?

'Pore Addie—Adlid, er name was, but it came down to Addie,—she's been dead this twenty year, an' I've been married to the present Mrs. Williams, Sophie Briggs as was, for more'n seventeen—me and Addie never 'ad no children, more's the pity—well, as I was tellin' you she was as you might say, a real lady: companion to Mrs. Folkes up at the 'All, and the daughter of a clergyman. It a'most turned me 'ead the first time I 'ad a sort of guess as I might 'ave a chance with 'er. 'Twasn't altogether what they call the "glad eye" nowadays, as she gave me, but a kind o' soft look. She wasn't ever anything out o' the or'nery to look at, and two years older than me at that, but I s'pose I was what you'd call hambitious. Anyways I married 'er.'

Mr. Williams made a long reflective pause as if he were contemplating the glories of the great social connections that he had failed to live up to; and I nodded my admiration as admiringly as I was able. I had expected something a little more exciting than this. It might be a great step from Mr. Williams' point of view to marry some country vicar's daughter, but it was hardly what I should have called a connection with the highest in the land.

Mr. Williams frowned with a slightly conspiratorial effect, as he resumed in a lower voice.

'You wait! That was only the beginnin', an' I'll never forget the day as we 'eard the news as Addie's younger sister—'arf-sister to be quite correck—had married a baronite, squire of the place 'e was, an' old enough to be 'er gran'father pretty near; but there it was—what you'd call one o' these real good fam'lies,

first baronite created by Charles the Second an' so on. Anyways 'e married 'er, same as I'd married Addie, and one went down and the other went up in a manner o' speakin'. I seen 'er once; Addie's sister, quite the lady she was. Come in a b'rourke and pair, it was afore the days o' motors. Very 'aughty with us both, but there was no gettin' over the fack as I was 'er own 'arf brother-in-law, which ain't so to speak a very distant connection.'

'Even so, I don't quite see——' I began.

'Nacherally you wouldn't,' Mr. Williams interrupted me. 'Nor yet no one else wouldn't, seein' as it's better to mention no names; though for the matter o' that, I s'pose there ain't many in the town as reelises the 'ole truth, seein' as I don't talk about it to everyone. Shouldn't 'ave known it meself if I 'adn't got the 'abit o' readin' the Society noos, reg'lar every evening. Gives me a feelin' o' bein' up in the world readin' about some o' my in-laws, I assure you.

'Well, the point as I was goin' to tell you is that some eight year back the eldest son of Addie's sister's 'usband, the baronite, the eldest son by his first marriage that's to say, married the daughter of an Earl, an' that Earl's fam'ly is very closely connected with another fam'ly,' he dropped his voice to a thrilling whisper, 'what married into Roy'lty not so long ago. An' still mentionin' no names.'

He resumed his ordinary tone and sighed profoundly as he added:

'I 'ad a mind to shut up shop the day o' the weddin', but I thought it might look a bit too boastful in a manner o' speakin'. 'Owever, there it is, and there's no gettin' round the fack as I'm connected with the

'ighest in the land, seein' that that one 'oo married into Roy'lty is second cousin to Addie's sister's stepson's wife, which after all ain't so very distant, as you might say.'

There was no denying the instance, nor the possibility that in this democratic age, royalty itself might, on investigation, find itself remotely allied to some connections even queerer than this successful grocer.

'I'm proud to have shaken hands with you, Mr. Williams,' I said.

He smiled genially. 'Some goes up and some goes down, as you might say,' he remarked, and added: 'For the matter o' that you might go a bit further yet if you'd a mind to.'

'You mean that you're practically connected with every sovereign in Europe?' I suggested.

'In a manner o' speakin',' he agreed, 'but I was thinkin' o' the other end, so to say. You see—though this, I needn't tell you, is strictly privit between you and me—the present Mrs. Williams, Sophie Briggs as was, though she's always been a good girl an' a better wife no one could wish for, seven children we got and two dead—well, as a matter o' fack, she was born in the poor 'ouse, an' you can't 'ardly go no lower than that, can you?'

And it is Sophie Briggs who still remains in my mind; born in the parish workhouse and now connected by marriage with nearly every sovereign in Europe. Personally, I prefer Mr. Williams' story to that of King Cophetua. It seems to me more probable.

THE HANDS OF SERGE DAVID



‘**O**NE day, America will produce a very great musician,’ a man said to me in the Club the other day.

‘It has already,’ I reminded him: ‘Serge David.’

He thought for a moment, and then looked at me blankly.

‘Who is Serge David?’ he asked.

‘You will know—before long!’ I said.

I could not tell him that queer story in the Club. He would not have believed me. He had even forgotten that less than four years earlier, Serge’s departure for Europe had been proclaimed across the breadth of America as an historical event. But the world, not less than my friend, will soon be asking for Serge David’s history, so I may as well anticipate the demand by setting out the whole truth.

He was born in New York. His father, a compositor, was of Welsh origin, and his mother a Pole, but both of them also had been born in the United States. Serge David was a true American. If you had met him in the street, you would not have guessed him to be a musician. Only his hands betrayed him. He had inherited his father’s manipulative dexterity along with the slender taper fingers of his mother. He had the gifts both of sensibility and power there; and the gods, favouring him in his boyhood, decreed that those wonderful hands should be trained early and never misused.

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It was his uncle, his mother's brother, Szczpanski, who discovered him. Serge was barely five years old then, and this was the first time he and his uncle had met. Szczpanski was not a credit to the Davids, and Serge's father had never encouraged him. When he was in an engagement, he played first fiddle in the orchestra; but he drank and did other things that shocked the innate respectability that came from Owen David's Welsh stock.

Szczpanski, however, happened to be in funds on the Sunday afternoon that introduced him to his nephew. He had just returned from Europe after six years' absence, and he called to see his sister, and brought his fiddle with him. It may be that even Owen could not withstand the sight of that fiddle; for Serge got his ear for music from both sides. In any case Szczpanski stayed all the evening and, incidentally, determpied his nephew's career.

He loved an appreciative listener, however uninstructed, and instantly recognised the quality of the dark-eyed boy's admiration. Neither his sister nor his brother-in-law was to be despised as an appreciator of the best in this sort, but in his nephew he found the kind of audience he loved. He could do what he liked with him; make him flame or droop, lift him to his feet with sheer excitement, or plunge him into an exquisite melancholy. Serge had the quality of his temperament, as well as his delicate ear.

But it was not until Szczpanski's enjoyment of himself was spent that he had the curiosity to look more closely at the boy, to give him the personal attention that led to the discovery of his hands. At that Szczpanski became excited.

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‘Why, look,’ he said. ‘I tell you the little lad will play the fiddle by instinct.’ And he passed fiddle and bow across to Serge, who was standing in front of him, crazy with impatience to begin.

No doubt the certainty with which he fell into the correct pose was due to his imitative faculty. He had watched his uncle with an absorbing intensity while he played. But Szczpanski hailed the boy’s aptitude as a miracle, and gave him his first lesson there and then.

Inevitably there was opposition on the part of Owen David—an opposition that was quite as instinctive as his son’s gift for music. The Welsh strain was a factor in Serge’s life that sometimes decided situations; and his own actions were dominated by it on occasion. In this instance, however, all inherited superstitions and prejudices had to give way. Once he had a fiddle in his hands, Serge could not be restrained. Even if he had not had his mother and his uncle behind him, he would have found some way to gratify his passion. Nothing short of physical force could have kept him away from the violin.

*

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He made two appearances on the concert platform as an ‘infant prodigy’ before he was ten years old, and won the kind of applause that any child with his gifts would be sure to achieve. After that, he vanished from the public view—and the public mind—for thirteen years.

I do not propose to follow his story in detail through that period, but it is impossible to pass by the influence of the man who became his entrepreneur. I will call him Rosenbaum, a name that does not disguise his race.

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Many people, no doubt, would say that Rosenbaum was perfectly justified in all that he did. He unquestionably worked to make Serge an immense success, and spent large sums in his training. But he kept him and his mother poor, even after the tour of the Eastern States that preceded the trip to Europe. And even by that single tour Rosenbaum must have repaid himself, for America rose at Serge, although his reputation was still to be made. The critics who later slighted him in London, poured contempt on that first reception, attributing it to patriotism and pretending a fine scorn for American critical opinion. But America was right.

Szczpanski too, cannot unfortunately be exonerated. It was he who first enlisted Rosenbaum's interest and made his own terms with him. Serge's father was dead then—he died when Serge was nine years old—and his uncle had complete charge of the whole affair. He certainly was not honest, and it seems as if everyone was out to make money on Serge, and to keep him from making any for himself.

And he did not resist in these early days. He had to receive the sanction of Europe before he could declare his independence of Rosenbaum and Szczpanski. Serge had no doubt of himself. He meant to be at least as good as Joachim. But he dared not quarrel with his entrepreneur until he was safe. After he had been to Europe and passed the tests of London, Paris, Munich, and Vienna, he could snap his fingers at all the parasites who wanted to batten on him. He confided that intention to his mother and to no one else.

'One day we shall be very rich, mother,' he used to say to her; and she believed him. They made a hundred plans for their future, together. She was a

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comparatively young woman still, and looked forward eagerly to a prolonged visit to the Europe she had never seen, but that drew her with a strange longing. She had Europe in her blood. It takes more than one generation to cure a Pole of homesickness. And Serge, though his thought of Europe was merely one of interested curiosity, came to feel that it would be a great event in their lives when he and his mother first visited Poland together.

'This will take us a step nearer to Warsaw,' became a familiar saying in that household. Serge meant to be the finest violinist the world had ever known, but in those days the great ambition was often overshadowed by the little one.

II

Rosenbaum had laid his plans very carefully, and the motive of his campaign was to obtain a steady crescendo. He had no respect for London's critical opinion as such, but he meant to use it as a stepping-stone to Paris, and Paris as a stepping-stone to Munich. When he had won the approval of Munich, his real money-making schemes would begin. After that, he was magnanimously prepared to make even Serge David himself reasonably rich. But Rosenbaum did not expect to do much more than cover expenses in London, and his press-agency work was comparatively restrained. He was not seeking a boom. If he had been less certain of the final result, he would have spent twice the money on advertising. But he was so absolutely certain that he could afford to take risks. He had but one fear; and that was slowly growing into an obsession with him: the fear of any accident to Serge—

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the infinitely precious delicate mechanism of whose body and brain was a thing to be watched over and guarded, as a man might watch and treasure some unique and fragile jewel.

Serge's first appearance in London was to be at the Queen's Hall on a Monday evening, early in May, and Rosenbaum decided to take him down to Eastbourne for the preceding week-end. He had stood the voyage very well, but London had a little over-excited him, and it was essential that he should be at the very top of his form. No prize-fighter ever had more care and consideration from his trainer than Serge had from Rosenbaum.

And, indeed, it was this excess of care that formed the last link but one in that strange concatenation of circumstances which decided Serge's destiny. For on that Sunday afternoon he rebelled and played truant, running straight into the trap that Fate had laid for him.

Rosenbaum's nerves were a trifle frayed, no doubt. He was certainly far more nervous than Serge himself, who was capable of a surprising nonchalance with regard to playing in public. It may be that in his heart he rather despised his audiences. And matters came to a head after luncheon. It was a lovely spring day, and Serge wanted to go out again, but Rosenbaum insisted that he should go up to his room and rest until tea-time.

'You have been out this morning, all the time,' Rosenbaum said; 'and now you must sleep a little. It is better so. After Munich you shall have more freedom. Then you are made. Until then, submit yourself to my advice absolutely.'

THE HANDS OF SERGE DAVID

He spoke with restraint, but Serge knew that he was on the verge of one of those violent passions that sometimes overcame him. And although Serge had no fear of his audiences, he had of Rosenbaum's outbursts of temper. There had been moments when he had felt that he could kill Rosenbaum.

And his immense distaste for these outbursts influenced Serge now to a sulky submission; but when he was sitting at the window of his bedroom he began to plan an escapade. He would go out. Why shouldn't he? It was ridiculous to tell him to rest when he didn't want to. He was twenty-three at that time, but in many ways he had the simplicity of a boy of fourteen, ingenuous and unsophisticated. For the past thirteen years he had been subjected to an unusually exigent and drastic discipline; and for all practical purposes he was still a schoolboy.

He made his furtive escape from the hotel throbbing with the spirit of adventure. This was the first time that he had played truant, and he felt that he was making a bid for his independence. Rosenbaum dared not punish him. He would, no doubt, have to face one of those terrible explosions of passion when he returned, but that would not last very long. And presently he might be able to break away from his exploiters altogether.

The last thought came to him as a new and glorious idea as he made his way into Sussex. He had avoided the sea-front for fear of being seen by Rosenbaum, and had set his face inland to discover the richness and beauty of an English spring. It was all new and wonderful to Serge, a foreign country full of romance and strangeness. He had a sense of its age and mystery.

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If it had none of the grandeur of some of the landscape he had seen in America, it had some other quality that inspired him to day-dream. And he dreamt of release from the discipline of his entrepreneur, of freedom and independence. The dream of Fame was almost spent by its familiarity. He had come to take Fame for granted. This afternoon, however, he saw it in a new aspect. For him Fame began to spell not applause, but liberty. He was lost in a vision of that long-desired visit to Warsaw with his mother when he met Destiny in the narrow Sussex lane.

It took the form of an automobile and a young woman of seventeen; but it was the car that first engaged his attention. Motors were not then familiar objects of the countryside, and this one was remarkable in that it had obviously broken down and was attended only by a schoolgirl.

'Oh! I say,' she greeted him at once, 'do you know anything about cars? You might lend a hand, will you?'

Her speech was English, but so far as birth goes, she could have claimed to be more American than Serge David.

He shook his head, gazing with something of dismay at the awful complications displayed before him. The bonnet was thrown back, and the writhing entrails of the car were fully revealed to his untechnical gaze.

'I don't know anything whatever about machines,' he said.

Tertia Vandeen despised him from the outset for that acknowledgment. When her father bought the famous Fanshawe house and estate and settled himself in Sussex as a country gentleman, he decided that his

only child, then an infant of eleven months, should be as English as it was possible for any girl to be; and apparently he had succeeded. She had been to a typically English high-class boarding-school, at which she had been taught to ride, to play cricket, hockey, and golf, in company with the daughters of the British aristocracy—quite half the girls had had titles. Miss Vandeen had an awful scorn for what she called molly-coddles.

‘Oh, well, you might lend a hand, will you?’ she said contemptuously. She might have been speaking to some casual ploughboy. How could she guess that the hand she wished to borrow was so exquisite and valuable a thing—the world’s property?

Serge came forward nervously, but it was the car and not Miss Vandeen that scared him.

‘How can I help?’ he asked.

‘Just catch hold of that a minute, will you?’ she said, pointing to the exposed viscera of the car.

With a sense of great repugnance, Serge leaned forward and touched one of the tubes; then snatched his hand back again with a cry of horror, for the thing he had touched had been hot, very hot. In an instant a terrible picture of disaster rose before him, of blisters on the finger-tips of his bow-hand, of his inability to appear the next day, of the awful rage of Rosenbaum, of abominable failure and disgrace.

He sprang back from the loathsome, malignant car with a cry of terror and began to examine his threatened fingers. Thank Heaven! no harm had been done. There was no burn; his touch had been too light and sensitive. He was so engrossed in his examination that he did not see Miss Vandeen’s expression.

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The sound of her astonished voice recalled him to the fact that he had an audience. 'What on earth's the matter?' she asked scornfully. 'It won't bite you.'

'I was afraid I'd burnt my fingers,' he said. 'But it's all right. You ought to have told me the confounded thing was hot.' It never occurred to him that she could not guess what a priceless Treasure it was that he had constantly to guard. (He had had a narrow escape two years earlier from getting his hand crushed in a door, and Rosenbaum had nearly fainted.)

Miss Vandeen's failure to understand the situation was not less abysmal than Serge's own.

'Oh! don't be a fool,' she said sharply. 'It isn't as hot as all that. Look!' And she laid her hand on one of the cylinders, which was not, in fact, hot enough then to raise a blister.

Serge nervously backed away, shaking his head.

'But you must,' Miss Vandeen insisted. She was not used to being disobeyed. Some of her school-friends' brothers would have walked into hell for her.

'I might hurt my hand,' Serge said. He still overlooked the obvious necessity for an explanation, but she probably would not have understood, even if he had made it.

She was indeed hardly in a condition to listen to explanations at that moment. She had been in the lane twenty minutes and was getting desperate, for she, too, was playing truant and had taken out the car, alone, in defiance of her father's express injunction. There was, as a matter of fact, nothing wrong with the car. A bearing had become overheated, a trouble that had been cured by time and the open bonnet. But Miss Vandeen was as hopeless an amateur as Serge himself

in this connection. She still held in her hand the hat-pin with which she had been tentatively prodding the engine!

'I tell you, you must help me,' she insisted.

Serge looked at her with the curiosity of one observing a strange but rather beautiful animal. 'I'm afraid of hurting my hand,' he explained again; and as if by way of making the point more clear to her extraordinarily dull perceptions, he laid his right hand for her inspection on the bold curve of the mudguard.

She was exasperated beyond all endurance by his calm refusal. She had that sense of awful frustration that we rarely experience except in dreams.

'Oh! damn your hand,' she exploded, and made a sudden furious stab at it with her hat-pin.

Serge gave one cry of dismay and fled. She was not only a strange and beautiful animal; she was also terribly dangerous. But so great was his concentration on a single interest that he had forgotten her before he had gone fifty yards. She had pricked his middle finger. There was a little bead of blood on the knuckle of the top joint.

His first fear was of blood-poisoning; and he sucked the tiny wound diligently at intervals all the way back to the hotel. His second was of Rosenbaum. If he knew, there would be a perfectly soul-destroying fuss. Serge decided that Rosenbaum should not be told; and, as luck would have it, he never even discovered that Serge had been out of his bedroom that afternoon.

It would seem that from this point the incident might be dismissed as a casual happening that had held, perhaps, dramatic possibilities, but had been barren of any interesting consequence. Serge's tiny wound did

not inflame—it was hardly visible next morning; Rosenbaum remained in complete ignorance of the whole adventure; and for the time being we are not concerned further with the effects of the meeting upon Tertia Vandeen. In only one case out of ten million would there have been any lasting consequence whatever from the pin-prick, so vivaciously administered in the lane; but, unhappily, Serge chanced to be the one.

Some day his case will be a classical example in psychology, but there is only room for the briefest outline of it here. We may know a little now, but very few people knew anything at all then of the physical and psychical adjustments and reactions that are possible in such a delicately balanced temperament as Serge David's.

And the incredible thing that we have to admit in the first instance is that that amazing creature within him, which we speak of as the 'unconscious self', almost certainly did not want him to be a Sarasate or a Joachim. All the emotional associations of his training for the achievement of that ambition were full of the suggestion of restraint, of arduous toil, and the fear of his two principal masters, Rosenbaum and Szczpanski. If you had asked Serge if he wished to be the greatest violinist that the world had ever known, you might have noticed the faintest hint of hesitation before he gave his unqualified affirmative. His answer would have been a reasoned one. He would, almost instantly, have weighed up the prizes and pains of his expected career and decided that the promise of future liberty, riches, and fame were worth the price he was paying. But his unconscious self did not work like that. Indeed,

the way in which it does work is one of the marvels that are still beyond our comprehension.

When Serge went to bed that night he was worrying about his finger. There was no visible or sensible cause for his uneasiness, but he regarded the upper joint of his middle finger with considerable anxiety whenever he was alone, and just as he was falling asleep he was suddenly aroused again by an odd memory that was inconsequently thrust into his consciousness. He remembered with a quite unpleasing vividness an account he had read somewhere of the habits of the hunting wasp, which stings its prey, a caterpillar, in the joints of its body, producing paralysis, but not death.

In the night, he dreamt that the top joint of his finger had become enormously enlarged. And in the morning he pinched that finger repeatedly to discover if there were any loss of sensation. He fancied that he had unusual difficulty in fastening his collar. . . .

If Serge himself was not unduly nervous before his recitals, Rosenbaum was; and never had he been more agitated than on that Monday evening. This was not the supreme test of his pupil's genius, but it was an important one, and much depended upon the verdict. 'For Gott's sake, do your best,' he implored Serge, as he left the green-room. 'Do not safe yourself; gif them all you haf.'

And, indeed, Serge meant to do that, and failed.

There was no lack of enthusiasm from the audience. The ordinary observer would have said that the new violinist had had a great ovation. The critics, the best and most reliable of them, were warm in their praise next day. But Serge and Rosenbaum and perhaps two

of the critics knew that the success was not quite that which had been expected.

This thing is a matter of such fine shades of difference. The enthusiasm should have been more emotional; the *great* ovation should have been magnificent; and the note of the criticisms was pitched on the repetition of immense promise, not of immense achievement. And all these fine shades were but reflections of the almost imperceptible difference in Serge's playing due to the fact that he had lacked complete confidence in the sensibility of the middle finger of his bow hand.

At his second appearance two days later, the difference was a trifle more marked; and Rosenbaum was beginning to look anxious.

In Paris the following week the trouble could no longer be hidden.

'There's something wrong with my middle finger,' Serge confessed, but neither then nor afterwards did he say a word about the car in the lane and the lovely young woman with the hat-pin. He was afraid of Rosenbaum.

The French specialist prescribed rest and complete change.

A fortnight later the German authority in Berlin shook his head and whispered in Rosenbaum's private ear of the danger of creeping paralysis; although there was no symptom other than the loss of sensation and power in the two top joints of that middle finger, which now often dropped down into the palm of Serge's hand. And they found no one to advise them that he was the victim of a powerful auto-suggestion and recommend analysis and hypnotism.

In the end Rosenbaum suddenly decided to cut his

losses, and returned alone to New York, without the least regard for what might become of Serge. Szczpan-ski at that time was in the middle of the drinking bout that ended his career. And Serge himself went back to London, being unsure of himself in any language other than English. He was a very fine violinist still with only three fully efficient fingers on his right hand; but sometimes he would stumble as a man may stumble in walking when he has had a toe amputated.

Nevertheless he still hoped that one day he and his mother would go to Warsaw together. So far there had been no other woman in his life. He wrote to her every week; but he could not face the return to New York.

III

It was almost exactly three years after Serge David's failure that Tertia Vandeen was introduced to O. T. Ronald at Covent Garden one night in the opera season. She was there with her father, and he brought Ronald to her between the acts and announced him as a man 'who knew all there was to be known about music'.

Ronald was slightly insulted. He did not see himself acting as a kind of honorary professor to a millionaire's daughter, however beautiful; and instead of being informative, he chose to confine himself to small items of musical gossip. Tertia was not amused. She had had two London seasons since she left school, and her natural gifts of intelligence had begun to undermine the effects of her training. She had so far had twenty-seven offers of marriage but no love-affair; and although she was young and raw and very spoilt, there was the

making of a free woman in her. In many ways she was already more American than her father.

The orchestra was coming back when Ronald, now a little piqued, produced his tit-bit.

'One of America's failures among the first violins, there,' he said with a slight sneer.

Tertia raised her eyebrows.

'He came over three years ago, with claims to being the first violinist the world had ever known,' Ronald continued.

Tertia had an imagination and the hint of tragedy touched her. 'And he wasn't good enough? He has come down to playing in the orchestra?' she asked with the first sign of interest she had shown since her companion had entered the box.

Ronald was an honest man at bottom and suffered a twinge of compunction. 'Well, as a matter of fact, it was infernally hard luck I believe,' he explained. 'I heard him at his first appearance at the Queen's Hall, and he was almost tip-top then, almost as near as a man could be and just miss it. But something went wrong with the middle finger of his bow hand—a kind of paralysis—and that put him out of it, of course.'

'Which one is it?' Tertia asked, putting up her opera-glasses.

'Right in front there. Tall, rather thin chap, with black hair. His mother was a Pole, I believe . . .'

He went on talking, but Tertia did not hear him. She had brought two pairs of glasses with her, the second a binocular—too powerful for ordinary stage purposes—with which it amused her to study the expressions of actors and audience. And it seemed to her as if she were looking at the face of Serge David

from almost the same distance as that which had separated them on the occasion of their first meeting. He had come in early and was sitting with his violin on his knees, looking up at the boxes in the grand tier.

For a few seconds he appeared to be looking straight into the eyes of Tertia Vandeen. It may have interested him to find a pair of binoculars levelled so intensely at himself. He smiled faintly and sighed. A few people here and there still remembered his story . . .

Ronald's first and worst impression of Miss Vandeen was revived with new force. She continued to gaze through her glasses and took no kind of notice of him, even when he said his good-bye.

She had, in fact, completely forgotten not only his existence but, also, where she was and what she was doing. Every detail of that meeting in the Sussex lane had come back to her, and the mystery that had so often intrigued her imagination was wonderfully explained. She remembered the astounding regard for his hands which had always puzzled her, and realised that they were indeed all his fortune.

The curtain had gone up and the auditorium was in darkness, but she could still see him by the light of the stage. He was feverishly active now; and as Tertia still continued to gaze at him, her thoughts were coloured by the emotion of the music. She became aware of a highly romantic vein in her that had never been touched by her English social life. She found it pleasant to dream of strange impossible things discovered in the company of this handsome genius—the crippled maker of great music.

And then in the midst of her delicious dreaming it was as if the heat had suddenly left her blood. In a

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moment she felt sick and cold and horribly uneasy. Her heart seemed to miss a beat and then burst into panic-stricken action as it compelled the cold blood through her reluctant veins. . . . But surely it was impossible? She dropped her glasses and put her hands before her eyes, only to see with a detestable vividness the picture of a slim, nervous hand stabbed in the top joint of the middle finger.

It was unendurable. She must know the truth about that. She laid an imperative hand on her father's sleeve.

'I want you to find Mr. Ronald, father. At once,' she said. 'Yes, now. Ask him to give you the name of the man in the orchestra he was telling me about. He'll know what you mean. . . . Please. You don't know how important it is.'

Serge had more than once received letters at the theatre from romantically-minded women who had seen him in the orchestra, but this urgent invitation to lunch in Grosvenor Square had a quality that was new to him. Tertia had explained nothing, had made no reference to their first meeting—she had doubted her ability to be quite articulate in a letter—but she had got a note of anxiety into her invitation that was unmistakable.

He was received on his arrival by Vandeen, who had now heard the whole story and decided that the affair must be handled with a certain tact. Tertia, however, was within earshot, less because she trusted her father's taste than because she wanted to know a little more of Serge David before she made her confession.

Vandeen handled his opening very well. He was friendly without a hint of patronage, and warmed Serge's heart by judicious flattery—a form of apprecia-

tion that had once been negligible to him, but was now occasionally precious. And he came to the point of Serge's disablement with the air of a man who still hoped for a remedy.

'How did it come about?' he asked.

Serge frowned. 'It was an accident—just a trifling accident,' he said. He had never told anyone the story of that adventure. For some reason that he had never paused to examine, he had always been reluctant even to think about it.

'An accident?' repeated Vandeen.

Serge nodded and looked unexpectedly sullen.

'How long ago was that?' Vandeen pressed him.

'Just about three years,' Serge said. 'It was the day before my first show at the Queen's Hall.'

'You were in town, then?'

'No, Eastbourne,' Serge replied shortly, and his stare challenged Vandeen to say another word on that subject.

But Tertia had heard more than enough; and as she came quietly into the room she was vainly wondering if there were any conceivable compensation possible for the crime she had committed. Also she was nervous, possibly for the first time in her life; uncertain whether Serge might not be vindictive, whether he might not upbraid and humiliate her. She steeled herself to submit quietly to anything he might say.

And, after all, he did not remember her. No doubt she was greatly changed from the gauche, impulsive schoolgirl he had first seen, dressed in a sweater and a floppy tam o' shanter, but the truth is that Serge had thrust all the associations of the incident out of his conscious mind.

Tertia had stood braced to receive the shock of his

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recognition, but when his interested, shy regard of her exhibited no sign of dawning anger or resentment, she instantly decided to postpone her revelation. Later she would be able to prepare the way for her terrible confession. And her father, divining her intention, made no further reference to the devastating accident. He, too, had been relieved by the evidence of Serge's forgetfulness. Vandeen's own notions of compensation had gone no farther than a financial arrangement; but he distrusted the Quixotic vein in Tertia.

He might as well, however, have given it play on that first occasion. Tertia and Serge had struck fire from each other when they met in the Sussex lane. Then it had been a fire of hate, but their effect one upon another was always to produce a blaze of some kind. If Tertia had not maimed him, she might have resisted the attraction, for a time at least. As it was, she was possessed by a fury of giving that offered the nervous Serge every encouragement. He came away from that Sunday afternoon at Grosvenor Square enthralled by a new, and as it then seemed to him, an exquisitely impossible dream.

But when she waved to him from her box in the grand tier the next night, the dream began to take on the shape of Reality. Serge had spent his youth in firm expectation of eventual wealth and fame; and deeply rooted in him was the artist's faith that it was the honour and duty of the community to provide for him. When he began to think of Tertia Vandeen, the idea that there might be any shame in marrying the daughter of a millionaire never once entered his head. Despite his three years' indenture to the world as a craftsman plying for hire, he was still a visionary.

And it was, perhaps, appropriate that he and Tertia should have made their acknowledgments in the publicity of Hyde Park in the height of the season. The suggestion that they should meet there at half-past twelve came from her, but she intended their visit to the Row as a prelude to lunch and a subsequent seclusion in which she might at last make her confession. It weighed on her mind that when he knew he might suffer some intense revulsion of feeling, might possibly return again to his first hatred for her intolerable cruelty.

But Serge could not wait. The people and the place were no more to him than the painted detail of a backcloth. He saw only Tertia and she was smiling at him.

'Oh! how I love you!' he said; and she gave him her hand with the better part of London society as their witness.

They did not shock the world by kissing each other before that unseen audience, simply because, as yet, their love was too great and wonderful for kisses.

Vandeem, of course, had no chance against them. At the mere suggestion of his refusal to countenance the engagement they would have walked out of the house together. And his defeat finally clinched the resolve, which had been in his mind for the past year or two, to sell the Fanshawe estate. He had failed to make Tertia English; and in truth he himself was getting sick of England. There were too many fences in Sussex. . . .

Tertia came to her confession that same afternoon as soon as they were alone together. She could confess her love before a crowd, but not her sin.

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'Serge,' she said with a sudden, intense gravity, 'don't you at all remember meeting me before . . . three years ago . . . in a lane near Eastbourne? I—I asked you to help me with a broken-down car.'

He quivered a little, staring hard at her, and she saw recognition growing in his eyes as she watched him—a recognition that was developing into something that was new and strange to her, something that might be either love or hate. And then, before she could read his eyes, he had plunged forward and thrown his arms round her, holding her as if he would defend himself from her attack.

'Oh! you lovely, dangerous thing,' he said. . . .

Tertia knew nothing of psychology. If she had, she would have hesitated, fearing the shock she might be about to administer to his unquestionably sensitive nerves. All she knew, just then, was that she must confess her part in his tragedy, even though it might turn him against her.

'But just for once, I want you to think about it,' she said with a touch of impatience. 'You see . . . you see, really, I know as much about it as you do.'

If anyone but Tertia had tried to compel his attention to that hated subject, he would have jumped to his feet and run away. He listened now because the fascination of her was the one thing in the world that was stronger than his old horror.

'How can you know?' he asked, looking straight into her eyes.

She flushed slightly, and then, looking down, took his right hand in hers and as she spoke began softly to stroke the impotent finger.

'Listen,' she said. 'You met a girl with a damaged

car in a Sussex lane and she asked you to help her. She was only a silly fool of a schoolgirl, and when you nearly burnt your fingers on the car, she thought you were afraid. And—and . . . afterwards, she was horrible. She got into a beastly, unforgivable temper and—and stabbed at your finger with her hat-pin. Isn't that true?'

She waited for her answer, and as none came she raised her head and looked at him, still holding his hand in hers.

He was looking past her out of the window, his dilated eyes staring at a scene that seemed far more vivid than the reality of his surroundings. Time, for him, had first been set back and then suspended. He was standing for ever in one spot, his hand on a bold curve of a mudguard, looking into the strange, lovely eyes of a young girl whose face blazed with passion.

Then, while he still stared, eternity slipped by and the face changed. It had come close to him, the anger had gone, and the eyes were tender and pleading. 'Can't you ever forgive me?' a voice was saying, and he found himself back in Grosvenor Square with Tertia Vandeen's hands on his shoulders.

'I could forgive *you* anything in the world,' he said in a sudden rapture. 'I should love you if you stabbed me through the heart.'

* * *

There will, no doubt, be many sentimental people who will say that Serge's recovery of the use of his middle finger was solely attributable to his love for Tertia. The truth is not quite so simple as that. His finger grew strong again because he, at last, whole-

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heartedly and passionately desired that it should. For the cause of that temporary paralysis is to be found in the fact that deep down in Serge's unconscious mind there had been a wish to escape from all the arduous, never-ending discipline entailed by his training. Rosenbaum and Szczpanski had been terrible taskmasters; and all Serge's associations with his period of preparation had been of stress, fatigue, restriction, and punishment. Then an opportunity to escape had been offered, and that enigmatic, powerful god of the body that works such strange miracles within us had blindly seized its chance.

But with the vision that had come to him when Tertia by her story had put him back in time to their first meeting, he had begun, as it were, from a new standpoint. He was, as he had never been before, whole and single-hearted. Music still meant for him fame, money, applause; but only as a means to the attainment of something still better worth winning.

Yet there remained one obstacle to his complete recovery that time alone can overcome. The strength came back to his finger with an almost marvellous rapidity, but for three years he had trained himself to play without it, and he had tediously to break himself of that habit.

And Serge himself would have waited for his second *début* before marrying Tertia, but she would not. She was always absolute in her impulses, and she was intent now on making the fullest absolution. She had sinned against Serge and against the world, and she deceived him into believing that it was her duty, not less than her desire, to make atonement by living on fifty dollars a week.

THE HANDS OF SERGE DAVID

They are doing that still in Warsaw, where Serge is being re-trained by one of the greatest masters of the violin who has ever lived. He is doing it for love of his art and of Serge. And the four of them, for Mrs. David is there too, are a wonderfully united family.

Vandeen, who has returned to America, is advancing them the fifty dollars a week—an amount they never exceed—on the strict understanding, so far as Tertia and David are concerned, that it will be repaid in full. Indeed, they often laugh together at the thought that one day Serge will be richer than her father.

Meanwhile, the few who know, the real musicians, are waiting with what patience they can for Serge David's second appearance.

It will not be long now.

PROFESSIONAL PRIDE



‘YOU’D never guess what I been,’ he said. I had no desire to guess. I didn’t want him. He had sat down by me without invitation, a big man with a broken nose and resolute eyes of a clear pale blue; and I had not the courage to get up and walk away.

‘A heavy-weight boxer, perhaps,’ I hazarded, seeking to flatter him.

His hand went up to his nose. ‘That was got resisting the police,’ he said, adding with a touch of wistfulness, ‘Not but what I might ’ave done something in the fightin’ line if I ’adn’t fallen into bad comp’ny early in life. Put through a window at fourteen, I was; and sent to a reformatory not long after. But I’m reformed, properly now, thank Gord. Quit it all I ’ave, even the police supervision. Been in reg’lar work for donkey’s years with a comp’ny that makes safes. Safes was always a speciality of mine, and I’ve put the comp’ny up to a trick or two they ’adn’t found out for themselves. Seems a bit like black-leggin’ in a way—goin’ back on old pals. But there you are, I wasn’t never one to do things by ’alves. And I’m properly reformed, I am, and can come up to ’Yde Park on a Sunday now, and shake ’ands with a cop, like an honest man.’

I had forgotten my nervousness before he had concluded that opening paragraph. I have met many strange characters in the course of my life, but this was

my first sight of a reformed burglar. Indeed, until then, I did not believe that burglars ever did reform.

'But what made you give up your—er—profession?' I enquired.

'Ah!' he commented, 'and that's another thing you'd never guess. You might think, for instance, as I got religion or was worked upon by a bleating infant'—I think he said 'bleating'—'like you see on the films, but it wasn't nothin' o' that sort. Not a bit like it. No; if you got ten minutes to spare I'll tell you. You won't be the first I've told.'

'I should very much like to hear,' I said. Now that I had lost my fear of him, I saw that there was something uncommonly straight and honest about those resolute blue eyes of his. And, after all, it takes courage to be a burglar. Compared with that of the sneak-thief or the fraudulent company-promoter, the burglar's is a manly form of dishonesty.

'Queer 'ow things fall out,' he began. 'You might almost think sometimes as there was a kind of fate about it. Becos this little job as ended by reformin' me was just a chance affair; not one of my proper jobs at all. I'd done quite well over a little bit of business in North London three weeks afore, and was takin' a 'oliday—lookin' round me, o' course; in our perfession you can't expect to get on unless you keep your eyes open; but not meanin' to do any reg'lar work for some time to come; more especially seein' as the season was practically over. End of March it was, which was why I'd gone down to see a pal near Bushey, to talk over the chances of the Kempton Park Meetin'—'im bein' in that line in what you may call the off-season—and it was after I'd left 'im as I noticed a tidy little

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viller a bit back from the road, with the libery window standin' wide open. Well, I went and 'ad a look in more from 'abit than anything, and there was a big ole-fashioned safe, standin' in the corner. Enough to tempt a saint, as you may say—I've opened that sort afore now with a bit o' steel wire—but I wouldn't 'a touched it, not then, if it 'adn't been that it was a make I'd never seen afore. Well, as I told you, I'm a specialist in safes, always 'ave been. (All this what I'm tellin' you 'appened thirteen years ago, you see!) An' if I'd seen a cop at the corner, I don't believe it would 'a stopped me, I was that curious. So I just 'opped in through the winder to 'ave a look at it, an' I 'adn't 'ardly got both feet in the room when the door opens an' in walks the owner of the 'ouse.

"Allo!" 'e says, "an' may I harsk what you might be doin' 'ere?" Spoke a bit funny, 'e did, like a furriner. A littleish man 'e was, as I could have done in with one 'and tied behind me; but a good plucked 'un, all the same. Come right into the room 'e did, bold as brass, and lookin' as fierce as a lap-dog.

"Well, I'll admit it's a bit unusual," I says, "an' I 'ope you'll excuse me, but I'm in the trade," I says, lookin' at the safe; "an' my perfessional curiosity was aroused, seein' as you've got a make there as is new to me, which is somethin' as don't orfen 'appen . . ."

"Trade," 'e says, very sharp, "what trade, may I harsk?"

"Safe-maker," I says; "leastways, I works for one."

'E gave me a queer sort of look when I says that, but 'e only shrugged 'is shoulders, and then arst me the name of my firm. I give 'im one, the first as come into my 'ead, and then 'e says, "A very ole-fashioned firm.

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I shouldn't care to keep my vallybles in any safe o' theirs."

"Well, from the look of it," I says, "the one you got there's no better."

"You're quite mistook," 'e says, very stiff. "It'd take a very clever——" 'e stopped there and give me another of his queer looks, "a very clever safe-breaker," 'e says, "to open that safe."

'Put my back up that did, touched my perfessional pride as you may say, 'im bein' a furriner an' all and the safe, as I could see now, a furrin one, too; an' I gives it back to 'im pretty straight. "That!" I says, "Why I'd lay you ten to one in quids as I'd 'ave it open under the hour."

"Sorry, I 'aven't the time to spare now," he says, very ironical. "Another day, per'aps."

"'Orl right," I tells 'im. "You name any day you like, an' I'll bring along a couple o' bits o' wire an' a pair o' pliers an' open it for you. I shan't want more'n that." Silly thing to say, I'll admit, but I'd fair got the spike with 'im by then.

"A little later on, per'aps," he says, very cool. "I shall be abroad for the next few weeks," speakin' very correct like a furriner.

'Well, there you are, I ought to 'ave guessed as 'e'd got somethin' up his sleeve, but the feller annoyed me, an' I'd made up my mind to be even with 'im. "Very well," I tells him, "I'll call again when you come 'ome," meanin', you understand, to call again a bit sooner nor that. But 'e only shrugs 'is shoulders again, an' says, "Would you prefer to leave the 'ouse the way you come in, or by the front door?"

'Well, I thought as it might be just as well to see 'ow

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the rooms lay, so I tells 'im I'd go by the front door if it's all the same to 'im; an' I says good-bye to 'im very polite at the garden-gate—'e come as far as that with me—and reminds 'im as I'd like to see 'im again when 'e come 'ome and prove to 'im what 'is old tin safe was worth. 'E didn't give me no answer to that, just kept shruggin' 'is shoulders, furrin-like, and showin' 'is white teeth under 'is mustarche. I dunno when I've disliked a man more'n I did 'im.'

* * *

He made a long pause there, and his steady blue eyes wandered from my face to stare out thoughtfully into the distances of Hyde Park.

'And did you—er—crack that crib?' I prompted him.

'I did,' he replied sadly; 'and as things turned out since, I s'pose I ought to be glad about it, as I am in a way, o' course, though it 'urts me to think as my last job in the perfession should 'ave been such a amatoorish bit o' business. Lost my temper, that was what it was. In my perfession—my perfession as was, that's to say—a man can't afford to lose 'is temper. I never even made no enquiries as to 'oo he was and if he was really goin' away or not. Walked right into the trap, like a bloomin' amatoor. But what I can't forgive meself for, nor never shall, was that I was wrong about the safe. Ole-fashioned, it was, right enough, like I'd said; but the lock was full o' grit. It must 'a taken a strong man to open it when 'e 'ad the key.'

He paused and sighed deeply, still staring out moodily in front of him and apparently forgetful of my presence.

'And I suppose he was all ready, waiting for you? Caught you in the act?' I enquired.

'No! 'e never caught me,' he replied. 'No one never *caught* me, as you might say, though it took me best part o' two hours to drill the lock out. Couldn't 'a done it in that time o' course, if the metal 'adn't been so poor.'

* * *

He seemed to be stuck fast at that point, and I was beginning to be afraid, not so much that I should not hear the end of the story as that there had never been a story worth telling.

'Well, if they never caught you, I don't quite see why . . .' I tried.

He turned and held my gaze again with those steady blue eyes of his. 'No, you wouldn't,' he said, 'bein' a mug. No offence meant, you understand, but you ain't never been in the perfession. But to think as I should 'ave been 'ad for a jay, that's what gets me. Reckoned at the top o' the perfession, I was. And that was me last job! And 'ad for a jay! And by a bleatin' furriner!'

'But how?' I implored him.

'Never once guessed what 'e was after, until I read my press notices,' he continued, disregarding my question. 'Never once. I was always partickler about my press notices, you understand; not becos they're much 'elp, though sometimes you can get an 'int or two as is useful, but becos I took a pride in my work. Pretty near always spoke of my jobs as "the work of a very skilful 'and'", they did. Oh! well. You can read this one for yourself. I kep' it, as it 'appened, though nacherally it didn't do to keep 'em as a rule.'

As he spoke, he drew out from his breast pocket a flat leather case from which he produced a newspaper cutting that he passed on to me. 'It's from a local paper, o' course,' he advised me. 'You always get the best reports in the local. 'Andle it carefully! It's gettin' a bit old.'

It certainly was, and brown and brittle at the edges, but still legible enough. It was headed: 'Daring Robbery at Bushey Park,' and continued with, I noticed, an unhappy effort not to repeat the headline: 'An audacious burglary took place at the house of Mr. Oskar Szapalanski, a British subject, situated in Chestnut Road, on Monday night, and valuables worth upwards of £2,000 were made away with. The villa was cleverly entered by way of the library window, and the thief, who had evidently made himself thoroughly acquainted with the premises, must have made his way directly to the massive safe which stood in the corner of the room. As far as can be judged from the evidence, he must have first attempted to pick the lock, but the clever mechanism of this being beyond his powers, he proceeded to drill it out, a work that the police estimate as being one that must have occupied several hours.

'Nevertheless, this lengthy operation was conducted so silently that neither Mr. Szapalanski nor either of the two servants sleeping in the house were disturbed in the course of the night; the first intimation of the burglary being observed by the cook when she came downstairs to light the kitchen fire. The principal contents of the safe, which was almost entirely looted, was a collection of old silver, that had been in Mr. Szapalanski's family for many years. The loss, we

understand, was largely covered by insurance; and the police are hopeful of recovering the bulk of the stolen property, although they refuse to answer any questions at present, since it would appear that they recognise the work as that of a practised and very skilful hand.'

'Well, that sounds to me like a pretty good haul,' I remarked, returning the cutting to him. 'And a very neat job. What have you got to complain of?'

'“The clever mechanism of this bein' beyond 'is powers,”' he quoted, with a despairing lift of the head. 'Clever mechanism! About the mark for a scullery door, that's what it was! If it 'adn't been tampered with, sanded, I could 'a picked it with an 'airpin!'

His professional pride began to annoy me.

'Anyway, you seem to have got away with the stuff,' I said.

'Stuff?' he repeated. 'Stuff! Six tea-spoons was all I took, and what I left wasn't worth carryin' away. 'Alf-a-dozen pieces o' Sheffield plate, that was all, very nice for a collector, but no good to me.'

'And the two-thousand-pounds'-worth of old silver?' I put in.

'Wasn't there!' he said. Then, seeing by my puzzled air that I was still at a loss, he went on: 'Fake, that was what it was. That dirty little furriner 'ad took my measure the minute 'e set eyes on me, guessed what I was after and knew I'd come back all right, which was just what suited 'is game. 'E'd 'ad that silver all right, mark you, 'ad it for years and kept his insurance goin'; but 'e'd sold it a couple o' months afore, quietly to an American collector, though 'e 'adn't never said nothin' about that to the Insurance Comp'ny, you can bet your life. A dirty trick, I call it, even for a furriner, but I

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could 'a got over that if 'e 'adn't 'ad me for such a mug, sandin' the lock and all, so as to make me drill it out. Worked it all out proper, 'e did, the dirty little swine. It makes me mad to think about it sometimes, even now. 'Owever, I got back on 'im, at a price, mind you, at a price. And I'd do it again, rather than be 'ad by a feller like 'im.'

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'You mean?' I asked.

'I mean,' he said, 'that I was so annoyed by the 'ole affair as I decided I'd give up the perfession sooner than let that feller get the best o' me. He'd reckoned up most of the chances clever enough, but 'e 'adn't taken no account o' the sort o' man *I* was. Took it for granted I never couldn't say nothin'. I used to fancy I could see 'im grinning to 'imself at the way e'd took me in. Black beard, 'e 'ad, an' a lot o' white teeth that showed when 'e spoke. I could see them teeth in my dreams.'

'Well, I got the name o' the Insurance Compn'y from another paper I saw, an' I went to see the manager and blew the gaff. Interested, 'e was, nacherally, but a bit surprised and not knowin' what to make o' it; thought I might be 'aving 'im somewhere, until I brought out the six teaspoons which was all I'd got and put 'em on his desk, and which 'e identified from the list 'e 'ad along with the policy. "But, my good man," 'e says, "I s'pose you realise what'll 'appen to you, if you gives evidence?" And then I told 'im as I did an' as I was goin' out o' the perfession when I'd worked off this little job and the other what I'd been in, in North London a month earlier. I chucked that in

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becos the police would 'a brought it up against me as soon as I was nailed, and I preferred to tell 'em myself, seein' as I was goin' out o' business and wanted to start clear.

'Well, I got my own back in a way. They brought me up to give evidence at the furriner's trial, and he looked at me more astonished than anythin'. Fair puzzled, 'e was; couldn't make it out no 'ow, by the looks on im.' Bein' a furriner, I s'pose. 'Owever, it all come out then. They got the American what 'e'd sold the stuff to, and there was one or two other little things against 'im, as well. Three years, 'e got, and I got five, but I was more used to it than 'e was, and as luck would 'ave it, I was out first on account o' the war. Put me in a machine-gun corps afterwards they did, becos I was so 'andy with machinery. Did all right in the war, I did, though I ain't got no medals. Well, good-mornin' to you, Mister.'

* * *

And if you ask me why he should have told that story to a perfect stranger, casually encountered in Hyde Park on a Sunday morning, I can only suggest that after all those years of righteousness his old professional pride rose up in him now and again, and he felt an overwhelming necessity to tell someone how he had once been at the 'top of the tree' and why he was there no longer.

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SHE had never been to Switzerland in winter before this year. Her husband had been a hunting-man, and was not to be lured away in the height of the season by such fatuous lures as skating, ski-ing or the swift motions of a toboggan run. And last winter, the first after his death, she had gone South to Italy. It was the casual recommendation of a friend that had brought her to the Grisons.

And already, after three days, she had formed a new habit that had begun, almost by chance on her first afternoon. She loved to sit after lunch by the rink in the amazing warmth of that unfiltered sunlight and stay there until the shadow of the mountain had fairly engulfed her. In one brief minute, the heat of the afternoon was cut off; the cold seemed to soak through the woollen jumper that had been almost too warm a few moments before; the air came suddenly sharp and biting through her nostrils. It was, so she rather unpoetically put it later to Mrs. Everard, as if one had been sitting complacently in a hot bath and someone had turned on the cold tap.

This enjoyment of that swift change—‘the coming of the shadow’, as she always thought of it—was, however, but the first half of the habit, which was completed an hour and a half later, after tea, when she would go up to her bedroom on the third floor of the capacious hotel, open the double windows and gaze out

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across the valley at the recovered sunlight, shining still, rose-white and tender, on the peaks of those wonderful mysterious mountains. She felt, then, as she watched the slow submergence of that last remote altitude by the rising flood of night, a sense of exquisite calm, of perfect sustained happiness.

II

She was standing at her window on the fourth afternoon when she read Nita's letter.

She had been looking forward eagerly to her daughter's coming. They would, she thought, share that habit and emotion of hers, and she longed to share it with someone who would understand. She had already made the acquaintance of several people in the hotel, but they were all intent on sport by day and dancing and bridge in the evening; and although she was prepared to like many of them, she had so far found none to whom she was inclined to make any real confidence.

Nita had been staying with the Everards and was coming out to join her mother at Klosters, under Mrs. Everard's chaperonage. This letter would give the date of their arrival. Mrs. Grahame glanced once at the sunlit crests; saw that she had still plenty of time for the sunset, and tore open the envelope.

At first, except for the shock of such unexpected news, the slight sense of disappointment and loss, she believed herself to be unhurt. She had always faced the probability that Nita would marry one day, and how could she blame her daughter for getting engaged at eighteen, when she herself had been married at that age?

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She read the letter again, pausing over one or two sentences and finding a new meaning in them. 'I'm sure you will approve his being so much older than me; you know I've never been really interested in quite young men—not men under thirty—though Dick has just topped the forties!'

'Old enough to be her father.' The thought flashed through Mollie Grahame's mind, but she did not dwell on it. Her own husband had been fifteen years older than herself; and it was true that Nita had always professed a contempt for 'boys' under thirty.

'He calls himself a chemist, which is a joke of sorts, though he really is a kind of chemist. He has been doing research work ever since he left Cambridge, and Mrs. Everard says he was frightfully useful to the Government all through the War and that they wouldn't let him join up in consequence. She says, too, that he's one of the ablest men we've got. It frightens me a little now and again, or would if—only I can't tell even *you* that part—not in a letter.'

It all sounded so admirably safe and sensible, yet at the back of her mind Mollie Grahame was aware of a feeling of powerful antagonism to this engagement.

What was the man's name? She turned back to the first page. Vernon. Richard Vernon! Of course! She had heard of him; had read a paper of his given before the British Association on the Constitution of Matter—impossible to follow in places for the lay mind, but giving wonderful glimpses into the great mystery of being. She had read it soon after her husband died, and it had seemed, in a way, to bring her rest of mind. There had been something mystical and comforting in Richard Vernon's description of matter

as nothing but confined energy. . . . Someone had told her that he had been offered a knighthood and had refused it.

Certainly she knew nothing against him.

'He has had, not a breakdown exactly,' she read on, 'but a reaction after a lot of overwork. And isn't it lovely that he can come out with us to Switzerland so that you'll be able to meet him at once? Oh! Mollie darling, I know you'll love him.'

Mrs. Grahame caught her breath, and Nita's letter fell to the floor. She left it there and turned her back on the open window without a single glance at the mountains. That feeling of antagonism was growing continually stronger. She disliked intensely the anticipation of meeting this man who had fallen in love with her daughter. But why? Why? She didn't know. Could there possibly be something against him? Something she had heard and had forgotten?

She walked over to the door and switched on the light, then returned and stared at her own reflection in the wardrobe mirror.

And standing there she understood.

No, she had nothing against Richard Vernon save the fact that he had fallen in love with her daughter—a girl of eighteen! But by doing that, he had suddenly, horribly, pushed her, Mollie Grahame, into middle-age. She was only thirty-seven, but her life was over. In twelve month's time she might be embroidering a robe for her first grandchild!

And she had had no real life. She saw, now, that she had never known the deeper ecstasies of living. Her husband and she had been happy together. She had loved him in a calm enduring way, as she might

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have loved a dear elder brother. But there had been no mystery in her marriage. No passion. Strange, that never until to-day had she realised how, in a sense, empty, her life had been—to-day when it was too late. Life for her had been an affair of small comforts and enjoyments that she had accepted as a right. And she could look forward to the continuance of these comforts for, perhaps, as long again as she had already lived, another thirty-seven years. The prospect seemed suddenly unendurable. Yet there was not, there could not be any escape. She might still feel her own potentiality for the emotions and passions of youth, but her real youth had gone. In a year's time she might be a grandmother.

She turned again to the window, but the last light had died from the peaks of the mountains, and the outer air flowed silently in, submerging her in the still penetrating cold of the winter night.

'The coming of the shadows,' she thought to herself, 'the frozen shadows of middle-age; and I have missed even the last beauties of the sunset.'

She wondered if it were possible that in some queer, incomprehensible way she were jealous of Nita? Or if she feared for her a repetition of her mother's life? She was such a child to marry a man of over forty!

She refused Mrs. Detmold's invitation to play bridge after dinner. Bridge was one of the distractions resorted to by women who had definitely put all thought of their youth behind them; and, however listless she might become, she would seek no escape that way. She remembered with a shudder the greedy eyes and hard mouths of the women in the 'five-shilling' bridge-room at the Club.

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For a time she watched the young people in the cleared *salle à manger*, and steadfastly tried to face the thought that her own dancing days were finished. And when one of the 'nice young officers', as Mrs. Detmold called them, came across the room and rather bashfully invited her to be his partner in the next dance, she gently excused herself. It was sweet of him to have pity on her, she thought, but grandmothers do not dance the two-step. And then the sight of youth having suddenly become distasteful to her, she went up to her own room and found a temporary refuge in literature. She hadn't hitherto looked at that collection of Synge's plays in the Tauchnitz edition she had bought at the station, and 'The Tinker's Wedding' greatly amused her. It might be rough and rather brutish, but there was no reference in it to the loves and delights of youth.

She believed that the worst was over, as she sat by the rink next morning. She had brought skates with her, but, reluctant to exhibit her lack of proficiency before so many experts, she had not so far attempted to go on the ice. Now, she found a justification for her reluctance. The time had come for her to give up skating and every form of ardent physical exercise. Instead she could walk, ride, perhaps learn to play golf; and there were always books, music and pictures. She might begin her education again. It wouldn't be so bad.

III

Nita was the first out of the train, but even as Mrs. Grahame yielded to the furious ardour of her daughter's embrace, her eyes turned curiously to watch over

Nita's shoulder the figures of Mrs. Everard and Richard Vernon descending more cautiously the ice-covered iron steps of the railway car. She was conscious of a faint sense of satisfaction in the observation that he should have avoided the reckless precipitance of his fiancée.

She found, however, no evidence of the caution of middle-age in his eyes as she shook hands with him. His eyes were those of a young man, alert, confident, and as she was almost embarrassingly aware—challenging. It was true that she was soon to assume for him the near relationship of mother-in-law, but surely that hardly accounted for the strange intimacy of his glance. In some way that she could not define—his gaze had questioned her with an intimacy which was not that of a son-in-law.

She turned quickly to Nita to hide the beginning of a blush, that she hoped her daughter would not see.

She need have had no misgivings on that score. Nita, untired by her twenty-three hours journey, was revelling in these, to her, excitingly new surroundings.

‘And what does one do now?’ she asked eagerly. ‘Take a bus or a taxi or something up to the hotel?’

Mrs. Grahame snatched gratefully at the diversion. ‘Nothing goes on wheels here in the winter, dear,’ she explained, exchanging a smile of understanding with Mrs. Everard. ‘There are only sleighs; and no motor of any sort is allowed in the Grisons at any time—by law.’

‘Oh! how absolutely perfect!’ Nita exclaimed rapturously, and then turning to Vernon with a look that at once dared and taunted his assumed omniscience, she asked, ‘Now, why didn’t *you* tell me that?’

His expression, half-amused, half adoring, seemed at once to excuse and to worship her youth as he said, 'I must have forgotten. There were so many questions I had to answer.'

She slipped her arm through his unashamedly and pressed her shoulder against him in the midst of the platform bustle. 'Well, then, is it to be a sleigh?' she asked her mother.

'It's only a few hundred yards to the hotel,' Mrs. Grahame said. 'If you'll give the hotel porter your hand things and the tickets for the registered luggage, we might walk.'

Inevitably her companion was the rather travel-worn but still cheerful Mrs. Everard. The other two having received their simple direction, went on ahead, though Nita's frequent pauses for ecstatic admiration kept them within earshot.

'Everything is so absolutely new to her,' Mrs. Grahame almost apologised.

Mrs. Everard's smile accepted that and hinted that she had already had experience of Nita's reactions.

'Her vitality, my dear, is wonderful, wonderful,' she said. 'It's delightful to see anyone so supremely happy. Dick simply basks in it. She's like sunshine, he says. She revivifies you. And really I think you'll agree that it's an admirable engagement, when you come to know him a little better. The difference in their ages doesn't count, yet. They dovetail so beautifully. Supplement each other. Just at first, I wasn't sure; but coming over has convinced me. He never once seemed in any sort of way, to *tire* of her, you know. And she, as you can see for yourself, simply worships him.'

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'He isn't, of course, the least—old,' Mrs. Grahame replied, and then suppressing a sigh at the thought of her own determined resignation to middle-age she continued. 'He has, I thought, very young eyes—with a—a sort of ingenuousness. . . .'

'He's a real dear,' Mrs. Everard said as if that covered everything, 'and quite remarkably clever. His knowledge of French and German, for instance—astonishing!' She cut off her eulogy abruptly for Nita and Vernon had paused by the bridge over the fierce little mountain stream, and were evidently waiting to join forces again.

Nita was still bubbling with delight—at the village children slipping down the street on their little home-made luges; the clonk-clonk of the sleigh-bells; the sight of the top rail of a garden gate just peeping through the snow and the realisation that the apparently solid road on which she was walking was also of snow three or four feet deep and packed hard.

Mrs. Grahame had a feeling of slight impatience with her. She was being, her mother thought, a little childish in all this exuberance over trifles. If she were not careful, she would bore this brilliant lover of hers, this man of so many attainments.

But indeed, though Mollie Grahame was hardly conscious of a sense of reassurance in making the observation, Richard Vernon showed no sign of boredom at that moment. He was in fact watching Nita with an expression of absorbed fascination.

And it came suddenly to Mollie that somewhere, at some time, she had seen just that expression on some other face. Perplexingly it had some association with the kennels at home, and then in a flash the memory

came back to her. She had taken that nice acquaintance of hers, Mrs. Napier, who had died so tragically, to see the puppies; and she had watched their delicious foolishness, their ecstatic lolloping gambols and sham furies with just that same air of absorbed, fascinated attention. Her eyes, too, had been curiously like Richard Vernon's. It was possible that Mrs. Napier had been some relation of his? Mollie had only known her slightly. She had hoped to know her better, and then she had died in childbirth. It had been her first child and she had been nearly forty. But that was oh! years ago, before the War. . . .

At the moment, Mollie was interested in recalling that likeness of expression, only as an odd trick of memory. Later, when in her own room she was receiving Nita's charming, ingenuous confession of love, a thought of the association returned to her with a new significance, and a surge of passionate motherliness swept over her. She wanted then, to protect this darling of hers against the love of a man who might be regarding her as a fascinating, amusing plaything to be petted, pampered, encouraged to exhibit the full repertoire of her vivacious youth. Nita was worth more than that, a thousand times more. Her spontaneous reactions to life were not a sign of foolishness. None knew better than her mother, that the child had a true feeling for beauty and deep, splendid affections.

'Mother, darling; you will like him very, very much, won't you?' Nita was saying, and Mollie felt just then as if that were the most difficult promise she could be called upon to give.

'If he makes *you* happy, little love, I will,' she said.

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'But he has, already,' Nita protested gladly. 'Can't you see how happy I am?'

'Yes, dear; but don't forget that I'm a silly old woman and very jealous,' Mollie returned.

'Oh! my beautiful,' Nita responded using her old childish term of endearment, 'you know that you will always come first with me. *You* need never be jealous of anybody, not even of Dick.'

Mollie smiled tenderly on what seemed to her, then, a piece of innocent exaggeration, and made no comment on her daughter's failure to deny the assertion that her mother was a 'silly old woman'.

'And, at least, I'm not *old*,' she thought to herself an hour or two later, as she stood before the wardrobe mirror, trying to appraise the precise effect of the black velvet evening dress she still wore despite the fact that her two years of mourning had all but expired.

'Inclining rather to a comfortable middle-age and a change of adjective—the substitution of "elegant", say, for "slender"; of "charm" for "fascination" of . . . But I'm not going to let that man, Vernon, treat Nita as an adorable puppy!'

IV

That flooding emotion of protection was still uppermost in Mollie when she came down to breakfast the next morning. Richard Vernon and Mrs. Everard, quite recovered from the fatigue of the journey, joined her almost immediately; but Nita, the energetic one, was noticeably late—an anomaly that her mother understood the moment the girl entered the *salle-à-manger*. She had so evidently, Mollie guessed, been

struggling not only with the unfamiliarities of her first 'winter sports' costume', but also with her reluctance to appear in it.

Indeed it was not, it was not designed to be, becoming. The baggy velveteen knickerbockers and belted tunic exaggerated a slight heaviness of the hips that in this dress, custom associated with the narrow loins of a man. The heavy worsted stockings gave an effect of shapelessness to her legs below the knee, further emphasised by the extra pair of woollen socks turned down over the tops of the clumsy boots. Finally, the boots themselves, thick soled and 'hobbed', necessitated a slipping, clattering, short-stepping walk over the polished wood floor, that was anything but graceful.

'Oh, don't for goodness sake look at me,' Nita gasped with a red face, as she ducked down hurriedly into her chair.

'My dear, what does it matter? You're in the fashion,' Mrs. Everard consoled her with a glance round the salle in which a dozen other young women displayed variants of the same dress. But it was her mother's fond smile that served to put Nita at her ease.

Mollie, herself, however, had suffered another disturbing twinge of suspicion when Nita entered the room. She had seen Vernon look up quickly and then avert his glance from the advancing figure with a little frown of dissatisfaction. It may have been that he had thoughtfully wished to save his fiancée from any further embarrassment, but Mollie, keyed up that morning to criticise his every attitude and expression, pondered, and no doubt attached altogether too much importance to that one trivial indication throughout a day that gave

her little other opportunity to observe the lovers together.

For Nita had come to ski, and she nervously hid her first efforts from all but Vernon, who, it seemed, added ski-ing to the long tale of his accomplishments. They were away together all day, but it was plain enough on their return that Vernon, if he had felt any disapproval of that clumsy dress, must have very successfully hidden it from the tired, sunburnt, but blissfully happy Nita who came in with him to tea at a quarter to five. Her embarrassment, too, had evaporated. She stumped into the lounge now, with the easy assurance of being and doing the right thing.

And, after dinner, she and Vernon danced—reversing for once the parts of pupil and teacher, though he proved an apt learner. Mollie, frowning slightly, watched them a little anxiously. He was, she had to admit, a very attractive man, and she was more than ever surprised at Mrs. Everard's assurances that he had no history so far as women were concerned.

'He has been too well occupied,' Mrs. Everard said, 'with his work, you know.'

Mollie pursed her lips. 'But he looks so—athletic,' she protested, regarding the upright graceful figure that exhibited no sign of the scholar's droop.

'Wise man,' was Mrs. Everard's annotation. 'Always kept himself fit. He plays in order to be able to work, he says. I've always thought it so clever of him. Never works at play or plays at work, you know.'

'Oh! my dear, don't try to make out that he's perfection,' Mollie replied, sharply. 'Perfect men never make good husbands.' She was vexed at her own

irritability, and quite unable to account for it, when all the indications seemed to show that Nita had made quite an astoundingly wise choice. This must be, she thought, another of the symptoms of middle-age—a diagnosis that was apparently confirmed a few minutes later.

Vernon was sitting by her, then, in the interval between two dances, and he turned to her with an uncharacteristic shyness to say:

'Don't *you* ever . . . I mean aren't you dancing this evening? I'm afraid I'm not by any means an expert, but if you would trust me as a partner. . . .'

'Oh! I'm too old to dance,' Mollie returned curtly, and met his eyes looking into hers, full of a grave and earnest speculation.

'Much too old,' she repeated, flushed slightly and got up from her chair. 'I'm going upstairs now—to read,' she added as some kind of apology.

She was ashamed of herself. 'Really, I don't know what's the matter with me,' she said aloud when she was in her own room; and then finding herself standing opposite the mirror, she turned away with a sudden spasm of disgust. 'I suppose I'm getting tired of myself,' she thought with a sigh; and by way, perhaps, of essaying a cure for that trouble, she very deliberately avoided the looking-glass as she undressed.

But even the plays of John Synge failed to divert her that night. Life seemed to her so empty, so meaningless; and the repetition of the resolve. 'I must try to like him, for Nita's sake,' brought her no kind of satisfaction . . .

The resolve, however, remained with her, and she was given a chance to put it into practice next day.

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Nita's unaccustomed muscles were too sore and stiff to attempt another lesson in the use of those amazingly undocile skis, and over breakfast she decided for the rink, having come down already prepared in a short skirt and brown shoes.

'I suppose you're not too old to skate?' Vernon asked, looking gravely, even she thought with something of reproach, at Mollie as he spoke.

'They're all so clever, I haven't dared to try,' she said.

'Of course you'll skate, darling,' Nita put in authoritatively.

'This isn't, you know, at all a *professional* sort of place,' Vernon added, in his soft quiet voice. 'Not like St. Moritz, for instance. I'm sure you'll find lots of beginners on the rink.'

'There were some,' Mollie admitted. 'But there were some tremendously clever people, too, who performed the most amazing feats.'

'Well, I'm a beginner, and *I* don't mind,' Nita said firmly, and Mollie checked the impulse to retort that Nita was also a beginner in life. She must, she realised, control this absurd irritability of her. Also, it crossed her mind that it could make no possible difference to anyone if she did make rather an exhibition of herself on the ice. Why should she mind?

Nevertheless, she was pleasantly surprised to find that within five minutes she felt quite at home on her skates. She had not been on the ice since the lake in the Park had borne in February, 1916, but in these first five minutes she seemed to have recovered all her former skill such as it was.

Only seven years ago! and Nita had been a baby of

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eleven and Mollie herself a young, oh! such a very young woman!

Vernon's voice at her side disturbed a reverie that she was not sorry to have interrupted.

'Nita has given herself over, temporarily, to the instructor,' he said. 'Shall we go round together?' He held out his hands as if he took her answer for granted, and she accepted the offer without hesitation. This would give her the opportunity she sought, to try and like him.

'I suppose,' she began, as they settled into an easy swing, 'that you are not by any chance a relation of a Mrs. Napier I once knew? She has been dead, poor dear, many years now. Your eyes reminded me of her.'

'She was my elder sister,' he said gravely. 'And my best friend.'

Mollie was glad to hear that—very glad. She had been greatly attracted by Mrs. Napier, and believed, now, that she would find a reason for liking Vernon.

'I admired her so much,' she said with real feeling.

'Everyone did,' Vernon replied. 'She was one of those rare people who only come now and again.' He sighed as he added, 'I still miss her. She was so completely the perfect confidante to me—sister and mother and wife—all that I've ever known. She was ten years older than I was, and she brought me up, taught me everything I know that was really worth knowing.'

'Yes, I can understand that,' Mollie agreed softly. 'I, unfortunately, knew her very slightly. I only met her twice.' And she went on to tell him the incident of the puppies.

'She adored life, young, vigorous life,' he said. She

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could "lose herself" as she used to say, in the young. Children never tired her. She could give herself to them so utterly.'

'Haven't you something of the same faculty?' Mollie asked on the spur of the moment.

His hands twitched slightly on hers as if her question had startled him. 'I'm not sure,' he said with a manifest hesitation. And then, 'But no, not just in the same measure that Edith had. Isn't that a gift that only a woman *could* have in perfection?'

'A man has so many other interests, you mean?' Mollie suggested.

'It may be that,' he returned, in a tone that left no doubt of his wish to change the conversation. 'Shall we go round again?'

Mollie was quite willing. Out on the ice, the melodies of the little string-band in the pavilion were refined by distance and the thin air. She heard the items of that limited repertoire less as music than as the suggestion of a rhythm that set the swing of their almost effortless movement round the rink. For the first time since she had received Nita's letter, she felt quietly, peacefully happy. Perhaps it was, she thought, because she had ceased to have any suspicions of her companion. He was Mrs. Napier's brother, and he must therefore be—trustworthy. Also, she was beginning to like him, now, for his own sake. He was so restful and understanding. He too, had, she inferred, given himself up to the same mood as herself. He was not bothering her with conversation. For the time being, his life and hers held nothing but surrender to the rhythm of this exquisite smooth motion that was almost flying.

Nita's vigorous hail from a few yards away awoke her with something of the shock of one rudely startled out of a delightful dream.

'Can you spare me Dick, for a little bit now, dear?' Nita asked roguishly, spurting up to them and then checking herself with an abruptness that seemed to threaten disaster.

Mollie, making a movement to disengage her hands, could not but be aware of the reluctance with which they were relinquished; and as the other two skated away across the rink, a new doubt suddenly assailed her. Would Nita demand too much from him? She was so extraordinarily active and impetuous that it might tire him continually to live up to her. And had not the same thought been in his own mind when he had said that he had not his sister's faculty for giving himself up to the young?

v

But if that had, indeed, been in his mind, Mollie could detect no sign of it in either his expressions or his actions in the course of the next four days. He appeared indefatigable, outdoing Nita herself in the vigour with which he threw himself into every kind of winter-sport, so that occasionally she had to confess the effort it cost her to keep up with him. And after a long day's ski-ing, he was ready and alert to dance in the evening for just so long as she was willing. (Mollie, too, had consented to dance, now; but not with Vernon. He had not asked her again.)

Nor was it alone in physical endurance that he outvied the youthfulness of his fiancée, for he beat her, also, in the exhibition of a courage that verged on the

reckless. They had, for instance, taken the little mountain train up to Laret one morning, coming down together on a 'luge' when the run happened to be particularly fast; and Nita confessed that she had held her breath at some of the corners.

'It's all right as long as you keep your head,' Vernon had explained, carelessly, to Mollie. And he never lost his head. Nita bore witness to that.

In those four days, Mollie was thrown back almost exclusively upon the company of Mrs. Everard, and accepted the necessity with all the equanimity of which she was capable, as discipline for the middle-aged life she saw before her. They talked of Switzerland, of the people in the hotel, the many friends at home known to both of them; and each day it came back to Molly as a fresh surprise to find that she had so little interest in these subjects. These things, she continually tried to persuade herself, would in future constitute her life and yet she could not believe it. Now, as never before, she was aware of a great want, an intense longing for something that she could not define. And sometimes she attributed it to the effect of the fine, strong air that had set her blood racing; while at others she wondered if this strange lack of interest in the only possible existence for her, was due to a foreboding, a presentiment of her own death?

The afternoon of the fourth day, however, brought a break in the monotony. Vernon had slightly ricked his ankle while ski-ing; and that evening he was unable to dance, although he—something too easily, Mollie thought—persuaded Nita to accept the invitation of various partners from among the increasing number of their hotel acquaintances. And during the

dances, Vernon devoted himself with considerable success to the entertainment of Mollie. He was in a witty, vivacious mood that she had not found in him before. He skipped easily from subject to subject, from amusing anecdotes of the Grisons peasants to the practical implications of that paper of his on the atom which, Mollie now confessed, for the first time, she had read and tried to understand.

She went to bed that night, stimulated and aroused. Vernon had touched nothing that he had not illuminated, and she had forgotten for the moment the dullness of her life. Only one recollection of that evening brought her any uneasiness. Nita, she thought, had seemed strangely apathetic. Between the dances, she had come and sat by them, but had apparently taken little interest in her lover's conversation, which in these intervals had always been addressed directly to her.

Mollie hoped that the child had not been overtiring herself or, horrible thought, was sickening for some illness.

She was relieved when Nita came down to breakfast, next morning, in her usual energetic morning mood; though once or twice Mollie wondered if her daughter's cheerfulness had not the air of being a trifle factitious.

'You're crocked for to-day, I suppose,' Nita began, turning to her lover, by way of settling the day's programme, 'but I suppose you might manage to get down to the rink?'

'I'll borrow a crutch and hop,' Vernon agreed.

'Well, then, I'll skate this morning so as to give you something interesting to watch,' Nita continued. 'But . . .' She hesitated as if she were faintly embar-

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rassed, 'but I've practically promised to join a bob-sleigh party after lunch. I haven't tried a bob yet, and I rather want to. Would you mind?'

'Is it quite safe, darling?' Mollie asked anxiously before Vernon could reply.

'Oh! absolutely,' Nita assured her. 'Major Newman's going to steer. He's quite top-hole at that game.'

'We might take our lunch down to the rink,' Vernon suggested when Nita had received her mother's rather reluctant consent to her joining the bob-party. 'I don't suppose I shall want to hop down there twice in the day, and I'd sooner keep out in the air—if only to put the finishing touches to my complexion.'

'You can hardly get any browner than you are now,' Nita declared admiringly.

'Oh! I don't know. Look at that Dutch fellow over there,' Vernon returned. 'He can give me a couple of shades easily.'

And he and Nita kept the conversation at that level through the remainder of the meal.

'They are beautifully devoted to each other,' Mollie thought as she watched them, and attributed a queer little sense of expectation that was fluttering in her mind, to the prospect of being able to discuss Nita with her future husband that afternoon. She had had no real chance yet, and there were one or two things that she particularly wished to say to him—from a mother's point of view.

Her opportunity would come when Nita went off to the station to join the bob-sleigh party after lunch. Meanwhile she was content to bathe in the sunshine and to talk intermittently to Vernon and her daughter. It was all so restful. Mrs. Everard had gone off to

Davos Platz for the day and taken with her all those disturbing thoughts of English society that were associated in Mollie's mind with her own dull future. Presently, when she had her motherly talk with Vernon after lunch, she would have to come back to all those mundane considerations—till then, she could lose herself. . . .

Her first effort to return to earth, however, was checked at the outset by an astounding and, on any reasonable interpretation, incomprehensible remark of Vernon's. Nita had nodded to them with a touch of patronage as she said good-bye; and, watching her as she made off to the Station, dressed in her ski-ing costume with the velveteen knickerbockers, and walking with what could only be described as a slouch, Mollie plunged abruptly into an old reminiscence.

'Her father so wanted her to be a boy,' she said.

She had snatched at that as a favourable opening. She had a queer and strangely embarrassing sense of being alone with Richard Vernon; as if all the other people on and around the rink did not count. And she had spoken without thought, instinctively grasping at the first straw presented to her.

And then: 'Yes, it's a pity she's not a boy,' Vernon replied. Surely a most amazing sentiment for a lover!

Nor did he attempt to cover it by any explanation. Instead, he turned to her with a smile of understanding, as if she must necessarily agree with and approve him, and further confused her by putting into words, the emotions that had filled her during the morning.

'One takes a day, now and again, or a few hours or one hour only,' he said thoughtfully, 'to rest and forget. And I know no better place than this.'

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Mollie had a quite incomprehensible feeling that this sort of conversation was dangerous, that she ought to stop him; yet although she had that quite clearly in her mind she heard herself saying: 'To forget what? One's relations with the world?'

'Or is it only with time?' he suggested. 'If we can just for a moment or two live in the eternal present, all the other relations cease to exist. I'll admit it's a miracle, but I believe in miracles. One has to. The belief in miracles is part of the mental equipment of the modern scientific researcher.

'If you get out of time,' he went on after a pause, 'you can do anything. Time is the essential limitation and it is a material one. It's one of our fundamental hallucinations. You see,' he looked at her, his face illuminated by that understanding smile of his, as he explained himself: 'What we mean by "time" is really change—movement of some kind. There is no measure of time without some change or movement. Stop that and . . .'

'Ah! but you can't,' Mollie broke in, all thought of that mysterious danger forgotten, now. 'You can't stop the sun. It'll be gone so quickly. And then . . .'

'We shall be drowned and frozen in the coming of the Shadow,' he said, completing her sentence, and using with a familiarity that thrilled her, her very own phrase. It gave her such a sense of contact with him, as if they could think in unison.

'But where our miracle comes in,' he continued, 'is in our power to arrest not the outside world, but ourselves—to "keep still" as it were, and live a lifetime in a moment. Afterwards, when the movement of life begins again, the memory of that moment will stay

with you—the little separate life that you lived while the sun stood still. . . .’

He was not looking at her, now, and his face had grown as grave as had been the tones of his voice, but Mollie knew that though her ‘moment’ had already passed, and that life was once again moving her relentlessly forward, she had had her glimpse of eternity and never again could she be dull or bored while the memory of that moment remained with her.

No further statement was necessary for them, nor any physical contact. She and he had met for an eternal instant beyond the boundaries of time, had met and recognised their love for one another. That knowledge would remain with them always, as of a perfect thing that no experience could ever flaw.

After that they sat in perfect silence, content to await that movement of the earth which should presently separate them. And to Mollie, the first indication came in a sense of a slow enveloping coolness that deepened and gradually submerged her, as if she were sinking deliberately out of the warm upper waters of the world, deep into the icy stillness of the ocean bed.

Reluctantly she raised her eyes and saw that the sun had dropped below the hard, bright edge of the mountain.

VI

But that evening, after tea, as she stood at her bedroom window and watched the rose-pink sunlight climb the guardian crests, her mind was full of peace and a great happiness. For her, too, there was to be, now, an exquisite sunset; secure in the serene confidence that she loved and was loved with a perfect trust

and unselfishness. That was her realisation of the 'moment', and it would be, in his sense, perhaps in every sense, eternal. . . .

She started uneasily when someone tapped at her door; fearing she hardly knew what; and it was not until the tap came a second time that she found the courage to say: 'Come in.'

It was Nita, a tired-looking, rather depressed Nita who entered, though she closed and locked the door after her with an effect of bracing herself to make one more effort that day.

'You look tired, darling,' Mollie said, painfully aware of a sense of sudden discomfort, of separation from her beloved daughter. 'Have you enjoyed yourself?'

Nita made no reply to that. She had come across to the window, taking the place her mother had just relinquished. And she was staring out at the gathering darkness as she said in a low, constrained voice:

'I don't think I'm going to marry Dick.'

Mollie's heart gave a great thump and seemed to stop. She was standing by the bed and she had to sit down quickly for fear of falling. Yet, on that instant, her determination had been made; she must resist this passing fancy of Nita's with all her strength. She had nothing, absolutely nothing to reproach herself with. Not a word had been spoken that everyone might not have heard. She and Vernon had not even for a single second touched hands. Nevertheless, she felt the need for a great effort to conceal that which had never been spoken. Also, she had the strangest sense of having changed places with Nita; it was as if the relations of mother and daughter had been magically reversed.

Her voice sounded, she thought, uncharacteristically hard and expressionless as she said:

'Is this your first lovers' quarrel, dear?'

'Oh! no. We haven't quarrelled,' Nita said, still gazing out of the window. 'We never should. It's just that . . .' Her voice died out, but she made a gesture with her hand as if she begged her mother not to interrupt her. And then with a change of tone she continued in a gentler voice.

'No! I've never had any secrets from you, mother; and I'm not going to pretend, now. You see, I know that he doesn't love me as a man ought to love—his wife. He loves young things, all young things; and I was one of them. I suppose when we met at Mrs. Everard's, he thought that I was quite the most fascinating of all the young things he had ever seen and that he could go on watching, and, in one way, admiring me for the rest of his life. I know, now, that he can't. Oh! yes, if we were married, he'd be ever so devoted and kind. He'd take pains, always—very, very cleverly, so that they'd *hardly* show—to prove that he loved me. And so he does, and will—as a daughter.'

She stopped, but to Mollie that last sentence seemed to go on sounding through the room. She tried to speak, but no words would come.

'And—and I don't think I can bear—not just yet—to be loved as a daughter,' Nita went on after a pause. 'You see, I don't love him—as a father.'

Mollie made a great effort to control her voice. 'But, darling, really, really, I don't understand,' she said. 'Has he—has he said anything to you that makes you feel like this?'

'No; and he never would say anything to me—or to you,' Nita returned, still with averted head. 'And I suppose you would never guess, because you don't—you don't know him as well as I do. But I've felt, oh! felt deep down all through me so that I've longed for it to be me, how he loves *you*. I might have known that he would, I suppose you were made for each other. I know it because I love you both—only—only—I'm not jealous, I'm *not*—but I can't help wishing that it had been me.'

Mollie jumped to her feet and held out her arms. 'It shall be you. It must,' she protested. 'Oh! Nita, I did guess—something, but—but—that—I mean, he will love you altogether, as you want him to—after you're married.' There was real passion in her voice, real conviction, for she was utterly sincere.

But Nita shook her head, moving a little away from her mother as if she would avoid that offered embrace. 'I know you mean it,' she said quietly, 'and that he would do his best. But I don't want him to *try* to love me. You didn't guess I was quite so wise, did you? I wasn't a week ago. And really it *is* wisdom, not pride or pique or anything of that sort. I've had a sort of moment—a moment of insight when everything was quite clear and understandable. It was very wonderful, but very, very sad. Oh! and I forgot, Mrs. Everard is going on to Italy and then to Malta and Egypt you know, would you mind if I went with her? I should like to, rather.'

Mollie's tears could no longer be kept back. They gushed suddenly, and her voice choked as she said: 'Oh! Nita darling; without *me*?'

Nita, still self-contained and dry-eyed, watched her

mother for a moment and then turned abruptly away. 'You'll have Dick,' she said.

'Oh! no! no,' Mollie protested, struggling for self-control. 'That's impossible—unthinkable—I couldn't—I would sooner a thousand times come with you.'

For still one more moment Nita hesitated, then she flung herself on to the bed beside her mother, and clasped her arms round her.

'My beautiful,' she said, 'we love each other so much that we're selfish. But we mustn't be—not about Dick. I know how he loves you.' She gently stroked her mother's face as she added, 'It's only natural that he should.' And then her voice breaking and the long-restrained tears beginning to flow gently at last she said: 'And I do love him well enough to want him to be happy. You will make him very happy, won't you? I'm sure you will.'

Nita fondling her and smiling through her tears, agreed that they would not part just yet, not for a month or two. 'You do rather want me to look after you,' she said. 'You're so very, very young. Years and years younger than I am.'

THE MAN WHO HATED FLIES



His wife laughed at that one weakness of his; and all his scientific explanations of the harm flies may do as germ-carriers, spreaders of disease, failed to convince her that his detestation of them was not an amusing eccentricity. She was one of those women who have a quiet contempt for science, although her husband was a scientist, and would almost certainly be famous in a few years' time, because he had the rare gift of becoming entirely absorbed by his work. There was no need for him to work. He had ample private means. But he always worked twelve hours a day.

'Ah! You want to improve the world too much,' Madame Aumonier would say to her husband. 'I am satisfied with it as it is. As for the flies you make so much fuss about, you may be sure Providence gave them to us for some good reason. Why don't you forget them?'

'I can't,' Professor Aumonier would reply. 'They worry me.'

In his laboratory he was free from them, since they were strictly, scientifically excluded. But his brief hours of rest were spoiled for him seven or eight months out of the year; and he complained that the annoyance was telling upon his health, spoiling his work.

When he came in for his mid-day meal, still absent-mindedly intent upon his research, he would suddenly

become aware of his tormenters. So often the skull-cap he wore in the house, had been mislaid (he had been bald for ten years, although he was only thirty-seven); and the attractions of that smooth shining head, appeared to offer an irresistible attraction to the flies. Even when it was covered, he found little relief. The brutes would settle upon his face and hands; or engage one another with a maddening buzz close to his ear. They were so exasperatingly foolish, so completely careless of the wild waving of his handkerchief, so disdainful of his dignity, so impudent, so apparently unconscious of his rage.

He had had gauze blinds made for the windows, but they were always being taken down by Mme. Aumonier to air the rooms. They lived near Avignon, and it was very hot there in the summer months. Also, it was a great place for flies—all kinds of flies.

Their only child, Bertrand, a steady, intelligent little boy of seven who was doing very well at school, used to watch his father's impatient battles, with a quiet shrewd stare. And it was he who one day started the brilliant mind of Professor Albert Aumonier on that investigation which was to have such a vast and unanticipated influence on the future of the world.

'If you think flies do so much harm, father,' the child thoughtfully remarked one day, after listening attentively to one of the Professor's fiercest lectures to his exasperatingly careless wife, who had had all the gauze blinds removed that morning on some absurd theory of giving the place a good clean: 'Why don't you invent something to kill them all?'

In his uninstructed mind, he had no doubt some romantic idea of a super-trap, but the childish remark

set the able mind of the Professor thinking in a new direction.

At the moment he merely shrugged his shoulders and replied: 'If only I could, my little one'; following that up by a dissertation on the lassitude and indifference of the world at large. For if, as he said—he had said the same thing so often before, that his wife never even pretended to listen—if you could stimulate people to concerted action, the thing could be done. Scrupulous attention for a few years to the destruction of all waste and putrifying matter; the avoidance or treatment of all stagnant water; a little care and forethought exhibited by the many; and the pest of flies and mosquitoes could be greatly alleviated, and perhaps, finally, eliminated. 'But the mass of the people are careless, indifferent, even to their own welfare,' he concluded with a glance at his wife.

Nevertheless, that casual suggestion of his little son's returned to him that afternoon; got between him and his work, bothered him almost as much as the flies themselves.

And it so happened that that year they had a particularly trying summer. There was a very plague of insect life in early June; and the weather, the flies, and the consequent stimulus to solve the essential problem his son had set him, began to get on Aumonier's nerves.

It was no better when they went to Normandy in August; worse, in fact, for he had then neither the refuge of his laboratory nor the distraction of his work. He tried to forget the problem because it was obviously outside his proper sphere. He was an experimental chemist and was conducting some very important

investigations in the realm of molecular physics. And although he would have been willing to admit that summer, that the achievement of ridding the world of flies would be one of far greater value to the community than any discovery he was likely to make relative to the constitution of matter, he felt that it was not his job.

On their way back to Avignon at the beginning of September, however, he stayed a night in Paris in order to call on a brother scientist, who was making a name as a biologist. This friend listened with interest to Aumonier's statement, but smilingly declined to undertake the proposed investigation. Nevertheless, he let fall one or two comments that were to have a decisive effect upon the future of the world.

'The thing to discover,' he said, 'would be some kind of highly infectious disease to which flies were subject, and—well, intensify it. As a matter of fact, it is known that flies do suffer from some disease that gets hold of them in wet summers—a sort of fungus. You'll find them wasted by it; almost transparent. Sometimes, too, as you've probably noticed, they get affected with a peculiar giddiness. It is at least, a theoretical possibility. But——' he smiled again, 'it's not my job, Aumonier.'

And Aumonier realised after this conversation, that it would never be anybody's job unless he made it his own.

He did not succumb immediately. That autumn, he still worked intermittently at his own research; but he began two new lines of reading, entomology and bacteriology. He had a wonderful memory; he could read all the principal European languages; and he learned very fast.

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His wife only laughed when he told her what he proposed to do. It would not affect their income. 'Ah! You want to improve the world too much'; she said. 'No doubt, Providence sent the flies for some good purpose.'

It took Professor Aumonier twenty years of arduous labour and experiment to solve his problem, and the great clue came at last almost by accident. The scientific reader will be able to follow in full detail the line of the research in Aumonier's tremendous monograph, modestly entitled 'Musca Vulgaris'. His Memoirs also provide much interesting material in this connection. It will be sufficient to recall, in this place, the broad lines upon which the experiments were conducted, noting more particularly what he, himself, never alludes to, the heroism of the researcher—typical as it is of so many of our inspired workers in the field of science.

For Aumonier began by making the immense sacrifice of all those peaceful hours of immunity he had hitherto spent in his laboratory. That refuge from which every fly had been strictly excluded, now became their very home and breeding-place; to which they were invited, nay, compelled, to come by every ingenious bait that could be devised. In short, Aumonier's laboratory now so swarmed with flies *all the year round*, that even his wife found it unendurable.

And there the devoted man studied every habit of the species, contributing incidentally a store of knowledge relative to insect life, such as Henri Fabre had never dreamed of. To quote but one instance, he discovered that within certain limits, individuals of the species could be educated, trained to come at a given

signal for food, and tamed so far as to suffer a light touch.

But the core of the study was the observation of insect diseases and ailments; no less than nineteen of which he has convincingly diagnosed and described. No weakness in the world of flies escaped him, and the sufferers were caught, marked, isolated in gauze cages, kept under rigorous observation, and a 'culture' made of their inferentially affected fluids. Other healthy flies were then brought into contact with the sufferers, or inoculated with the culture, until it may truly be said that Aumonier knew more of the diseases of the common house-fly than the most skilled physician knows of the diseases of humanity. Is there, indeed, any door to knowledge that cannot be opened by the life-work of such a mind as this?

Before proceeding to the Professor's supreme triumph, however, one curious side-issue must be noted: Aumonier, all unwittingly, cured himself. He who had been driven to fury and desperation by the torment of flies, became within twelve months, utterly indifferent to them, in this aspect. They had ceased to be an intrusion, becoming instead the single object of his interest. Indeed, in the later years of his research, he came, so one infers from his *Memoirs*, almost to love them. In the winter, at which season he tells us flies become more amenable to human influence, he had what can be described only as 'pet' flies, which came to greet him when he entered the laboratory, would eat sugar from his finger, and stayed with him while he worked.

We find in his *Memoirs*, in fact, something like a note of regret when he announces that the long-sought

culture had at last been found—the faint suggestion of a brief hesitation before he gave his discovery to the world. It may be that that note is due only to the regret of one who, having worked twenty years for a particular end, finds with its attainment a too sudden cessation of the familiar stimulus; but a passage here and there, unquestionably conveys the feeling that he suffered a qualm or two before promulgating the sentence that condemned every fly in the world to death.

For it was nothing less than that. The bacillus he had, as he admits, almost accidentally stumbled upon at last, was death to flies. None was immune. Moreover, the disease was almost incredibly infectious. The period of incubation was forty-eight hours, and during that time the infected fly which remained active and to all appearances healthy, could carry the germ far and wide.

The efficacy of the 'A-A' germ, as it was called from the initials of its brilliant discoverer, was proved beyond all question within three months from its first trial. It was a hot summer again in the South of France that year, but in July there was never a fly or a blue-bottle to be found in the Rhone Valley from Lyons to Marseilles.

And Mme. Aumonier, grown stouter now, but not less placid, was one of the first to contribute to that meed of praise which was so soon to flow in upon her household from every corner of the habitable globe.

'Well, I will admit, Albert,' she said complacently, 'that it is rather a comfort to be rid of them. The meat keeps better.'

Professor Aumonier absently stroked his fly-free

bald head and looked wistfully about the room. 'I am glad to have succeeded, Anastasie,' he replied. 'But for myself, I confess that I miss something.'

In his son's 'Life' of the Professor, we find a casual note that in his later years, he had a taste for having his head tickled with a feather.

* * *

If it were his work alone that he missed, he must have found some compensation in the invitations to lecture that now poured in upon him. The work of producing and intensifying the 'A-A' culture was out of his hands. In every civilised country, laboratories had been established to carry on those operations, and he was free to go whither he would. He went. He had no other occupation, and the thought of foreign travel appealed to him.

He was in Chicago when the first disturbing suggestion of trouble reached him from Europe. It was no more than a paragraph in the London *Times*, relative to the new disease among bees, which had lately made its appearance in France and England. But the symptoms were described, and Aumonier guessed instantly that bees were not immune to some form of the 'A-A' infection.

He paused thoughtfully for a few minutes on that inference, and then shrugged his shoulders. After all, every great discovery carried with it some minor disadvantage. And he made no mention of this new development in his lecture that evening. He was enjoying the magnificent reception America was giving him, a reception that was, if possible, heightened when it became known that mosquitoes had also

proved susceptible to Aumonier's disease. In the Southern States, said the *New York Herald*, all the women were busy transforming mosquito-curtains to other household uses.

He was in Japan when, nearly a year later, he read of the strange failure of the fruit and vegetable crops in the West. There had been abundant blossom and the season had been favourable, but the fruit had not set on the trees or formed in the pods. One account, probably exaggerated, declared that there would not be a kilo of peas, that year, to be found in the whole of France.

And then, almost at once, everyone seemed to understand what was happening; to realise that the Aumonier disease was performing far more than it had promised; and that ten thousand forms of insect life, irrespective of species, were being rapidly eliminated. Nothing seemed to be exempt: butterflies, moths, beetles, ants, spiders, and (thank goodness!) fleas were vanishing from the economy of nature. And although no one except the entomologists would greatly regret any of them, humanity at large was suddenly brought face to face with facts that had been common knowledge since the days of Charles Darwin, namely, that the majority of fruits, vegetables and flowers are dependent for their existence upon the pleasant labour of the swarming world of insects.

Fortunately there are some notable exceptions to this dependence of vegetable upon insect life. Wheat, other cereals, and most grasses are fertilised by the action of wind current. Potatoes, forming tubers underground, are not influenced by the failure of the flowers to fruit. But such things as peas and beans

failed at once; the whole cabbage tribe could no longer be propagated by seed; and the majority of fruits were so scarce that apples, pears, peaches and plums were fetching anything from ten to twenty dollars a pound in New York, three years after Aumonier's great discovery had been given to humanity. If the disease had affected house-flies only, it would not have mattered. They perform little or no work as pollen-carriers. But no one could have foreseen that every form of insect life would be involved.

There could be no question, now, that the world was faced with an unprecedented calamity. A form of scrofula was becoming endemic among the poorer classes; and a wasting anaemia; both due to the lack of the vitamins provided by fresh fruit and vegetables. Something was being done in the creation of a new industry, and a few years later it became a common sight to see men, women and children armed with long-handled camel-hair brushes, industriously carrying pollen from flower to flower of fruit trees and vegetable plants. But immense labour was required to do in a week what the myriads of busy little winged creatures had unconsciously performed in an hour. And fruit and vegetables from being the natural food of the many, had become a luxury for the few.

It was, indeed, a strangely altered world in those days! Gone were the majority of the sweet wild-flowers that had made beautiful the Northern Spring; and gone, too, were many forms of bird-life dependent for their food either upon flying insects or their grubs. And with the loss of insects and birds, something of music had gone from the Earth. The world was stiller

than of old, less beautiful, noticeably moribund. There was less colour, less variety, less vitality.

* * *

Professor Aumonier had taken to living in retirement in his old age. Honours and degrees had been showered upon him; he had increased his already ample income; but he was not, he knew it all too well, any longer a popular figure.

There were active A.A. (Anti-Aumonier) Societies in most civilised countries; and their aims beside the apparently hopeless task of re-establishing insect-life, included forms of virulent propaganda designed to asperse the fame of the best-known scientist of the century.

So Aumonier kept apart from the world. In his thoughts it seemed to him as if the activities of the A.A. Societies was a form of persecution very like that he had once endured from flies. He was getting old, and his mind was apt to return to memories of his youth, skipping all the period that had intervened. He was little stirred when one day his son Bertrand came to see him after an absence of over three years.

Bertrand Aumonier, whose name now rivals that of his father, was not then famous, although he, too, had been for twenty years a patient, devoted student of science. But that day when he called upon his old father, he had the great announcement to make which soon put him on a level with the other celebrities of his time.

Aumonier, half dozing in his chair, with his wife incredibly stout now, but still placid as ever beside him, was sitting in the garden when Bertrand found him.

THE MAN WHO HATED FLIES

'I have made the great discovery,' he announced quietly when he had greeted his parents. 'I have discovered a rare fly on the upper Amazon, that although it stings human beings, is a honey-eater and a pollen-carrier. And it is, almost certainly, immune to the Aumonier disease. In a few years I hope to acclimatise it all over the world. It breeds rapidly, and I have every hope that it will soon become as numerous and as widely distributed as the old house-fly!'

Professor Aumonier roused himself a little, shook his head, and with a half-mechanical movement began to flap about him with his handkerchief.

His wife chuckled complacently. 'Ah! you little Bertrand,' she said. 'You want to improve the world too much. No doubt, Providence had some good purpose in letting all the flies be killed. And we have all the vegetables we want here.'

WAYS OF ESCAPE



MRS. TREVARRIAN was undoubtedly 'queer'. Her neighbours, the nearest of whom lived half-a-mile from her cottage, were agreed about that, though they differed as to the signs of her peculiarity. The Vicar, his wife and two or three of their friends thought Mrs. Trevarrian altogether too eccentric for wanting to live in a wretched, inconvenient cottage right out on the moor, when she might have taken poor old Miss Baker's house two minutes from the church. But Mrs. Holmleigh, who was a writer and had an imagination, said that she could quite understand that part of it; what she thought so queer was Mrs. Trevarrian's 'complex'.

'I'm afraid I don't quite . . .' the Vicar had murmured the first time Mrs. Holmleigh had brought that out.

'Freud, you know, and all that'; she had explained airily. 'Suppressions and so on, a kind of mania it becomes.'

The Vicar had looked very grave. He had a feeling that 'Freud' was a slightly improper word for a lady to use.

'Oh! no, no, *nothing* of that kind'; Mrs. Holmleigh had continued. 'With Mrs. Trevarrian it takes the form of longing for a domestic servant, reasonable enough these days in most cases, I grant you, but she has got a devoted retainer already in that nice old Sarah

of hers. And surely there can't be work for more than one in that little place.'

'Yes, I remember her mentioning the fact that she hoped to have another maid before long,' the Vicar had commented.

'She mentions it to everybody,' Mrs. Holmleigh had returned triumphantly; 'and it doesn't stop there, for she has a photograph, a cabinet photograph if you please, of her former housemaid in a cap and apron, on the sitting-room mantelpiece; and always says at least once when you see her that she half hopes to get that particular maid back again, one day.'

'True,' the Vicar had agreed. 'Odd, yes; certainly a little queer.' And then: 'Another little mystery, perhaps, for you to write a story about, my dear lady.'

'Mystery? Well, hardly; for me, at least,' Mrs. Holmleigh had explained. 'Mysteries are rather *vieux jeu*, you know, Vicar, these days. What we go in for now is psychology. And if I *do* write a story about Mrs. Trevarrian, I shall concentrate on her complex.'

'Ah! Indeed! yes, I see!' The Vicar had looked round for his hat at that point. There was something about the sound of the word 'complex' that he found distinctly embarrassing; and he decided on the spot that it would be as well for him never to call on Mrs. Trevarrian alone. Mrs. Holmleigh was a very clever woman, and although he would never have guessed it himself, it was quite possible that Mrs. Trevarrian did suffer at times from this strange new mental disturbance that they spoke of as a . . . Quite a handsome woman, too, and not more than thirty-five at the outside.

It was perhaps with the idea of studying her material at first hand that Mrs. Holmleigh paid occasional visits

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to the cottage on the moor after that conversation with the Vicar. But she 'got nothing useful', as she said, for literary purposes, until that memorable afternoon in early June; the first really fine day that they had had for weeks, according to Mrs. Holmleigh, who decided to make the most of it by taking a brisk walk across the moor, calling at Fern Cottage on her way back for a cup of tea and, if possible, more material.

The first part of her plan was upset by the fog, the opening incident of that exciting day. Fogs were quite common on the Moor in June, but this one had a dramatic quality from the outset. The sky had been cloudless until three o'clock, the sunshine gratefully hot after the spell of damp, cold weather; and the light northerly breeze that chilled the air up on the moors had only added a touch of exhilaration to a delightful day. And then a little after three o'clock, a dense white fog came rolling out of nowhere like a vast bank of smoke. Mrs. Holmleigh had at first believed it to be actually smoke. She caught sight of it pushing between the tors, and thought the heather must be on fire. She had paused to watch it and had been scared by the rapidity of its advance. But though she was relieved to find that it was only the more familiar phenomenon of a moor-fog, she did not want to be caught by it in the open, and made at once for Fern Cottage, fortunately less than a quarter of a mile away. She reached it, full of excitement over her adventure, not, as she protested, a single minute too soon, for as she reached the door, the first streamers of cold dank mist came drifting over the hedge of Mrs. Trevarrian's garden, and before she was well in the house, the sun had paled, melted into a diffused halo of light, and

vanished together with all the rest of the visible landscape. 'Really, you couldn't see your hand before your face'; Mrs. Holmleigh asserted in a high, rapid voice; and indeed it was certainly true that from the sitting-room window, you could not then see across the little garden of Fern Cottage.

Mrs. Trevarrian had often a pre-occupied, abstracted air, and this afternoon, it was more marked than ever. She continually failed to answer Mrs. Holmleigh's questions; and more than once, she did not appear to be in the least aware that any question had been put to her. Mrs. Holmleigh was too uncomfortable even to make those mental notes that had been the original object of her visit. Obviously she was not wanted, but she really did not care to risk a half-mile walk across the moor in this weather. The fog was worse than ever. The windows looked as if they were filled with ground glass. It would be positively unsafe to leave until the fog lifted. Mrs. Trevarrian's complex must be a very bad one. Perhaps the fog made it worse. A touch of claustrophobia, very likely. Meanwhile, choosing between the unpleasant alternatives of remaining where she was so very certainly unwelcome, and losing herself on the moor, Mrs. Holmleigh decided to go on talking brightly, telling her hostess true stories of people who had come to grief in just such weather as this, walking in circles all night, or being attacked by tramps, or . . .

She was interrupted by the sound of a deep, low boom and the windows of the sitting-room faintly rattled.

'Oh!' Mrs. Holmleigh exclaimed. 'My dear Mrs.

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Trevarrian, did you hear that?' And even as she spoke, the deep, low boom and the responsive tremor of the sash panes were repeated.

'You know, of course, what . . .' Mrs. Holmleigh began again in high excitement, but before she could complete her explanation, that extraordinary person, her hostess, had got to her feet and left the room.

'Well, really! Oh! She's quite mad, of course!' Mrs. Holmleigh softly protested with a shrug of her shoulders. But what was she to do now? It was most embarrassing. She stood up, crossed to the mantelpiece and stared idly at the photograph of Mrs. Trevarrian's ideal, deeply regretted housemaid—a good-looking girl, she reflected, with a stocky figure but not, one would guess, very intelligent. She was still staring when she heard the door open behind her, and turned with a faint sense of having been caught in some rather doubtful action. It was not, however, Mrs. Trevarrian who had come in, but her elderly maid, Sarah, in her hat and coat.

'Mrs. Trevarrian's not very well, ma'am,' she explained in a harsh, slightly peremptory voice; 'and I've come to take you back to the village.'

Mrs. Holmleigh hesitated a moment and then decided that on the whole she preferred to take her chances with the moor and the fog.

'Dear me! I'm so sorry,' she said. 'I thought, you know, that she was not looking well, but ought one to leave her all alone. . . .?'

'That's quite all right, ma'am,' was the curt response.

'Oh! very well, if you are *quite* sure,' Mrs. Holmleigh agreed amiably. 'It's really very nice of you to

offer to come with me, and I admit that I should be grateful, particularly in the circumstances. You heard the guns, I suppose. . . .’

But the elderly Sarah merely turned her head and went out, leaving Mrs. Holmleigh to follow her. Nor did she give that lady the least opportunity for conversation on her way home, an opportunity that Mrs. Holmleigh had thought might be discreetly used to obtain a little more information on the subject of that poor Mrs. Trevarrian’s mental weakness. Indeed it seemed that the maid was as eccentric as her mistress; she was so morose, so inattentive, and considering her position, so positively rude in the way she kept hurrying on ahead, steadfastly refusing to respond to the most friendly advances.

When she was safely home again in her own snug drawing-room, Mrs. Holmleigh congratulated herself on having had a very lucky escape. She was inclined to believe now that that surly woman was really Mrs. Trevarrian’s keeper.

The fog was beginning to lift. Directly after tea she would go across to the Vicarage, tell them the story of her adventurous afternoon, and ask the Vicar what he thought they ought to do about that madwoman and her keeper on the Moor. Had she not warned him months ago. . . .

II

Mrs. Trevarrian was standing at the window of her little sitting-room when Sarah returned.

The cold north wind that had brought the fog was increasing in force, blowing strange rents and alleys in the opaque white mass, revealing sudden unexpected

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distances and almost instantly closing them again. But there could be no doubt now that the fog was dispersing. The tumbling heap of low white cloud that the wind had brought in from the sea was rolling away to the South, and very soon the sun would be shining again in a clear sky.

Sarah came straight into the sitting-room without removing her hat, and looked up anxiously at her mistress. She did not raise her eyebrows or perceptibly change her habitual expression of cold reserve, but the concentration of her stare had an effect of posing a vital question.

Mrs. Trevarrian shook her head. 'Not yet,' she said, after a short pause, and added: 'It may not have been. . . . We can't be sure that . . .'

She turned back to the window, and there was something in the tensity of her pose and the lift of her head that suggested a listener rather than a watcher.

Sarah came a little further into the room, and speaking in a low, even voice, said: 'Everything's all ready. I put the things out, directly I heard the guns, and opened the window at the bottom.'

'I know,' Mrs. Trevarrian replied softly. 'I've been in.'

'I suppose, if he should come,' Sarah began again after another short interval of silence, 'that I'd better burn the other clothes as soon as he's changed 'em?'

'Not the shoes,' Mrs. Trevarrian said. 'Because of the smell. Bury them in the back garden. If they come after him, they may want to search the place.'

At that reminder, Sarah glanced quickly at the mantelpiece, but the photograph of the housemaid had already disappeared.

'I've hidden it quite safely,' Mrs. Trevarrian said. 'I thought it better not to burn it, in case . . .'

For the past half-hour her mind had been working with an effect of extraordinary rapidity. In the course of the last ten months, she and Sarah had often spoken of the possibility that this occasion might arise, and had made certain plans to anticipate the event. But the thing had never been quite real to her, never been anything more than another of those fantastic, unconvincing schemes of her husband's, that so seldom worked out as he expected; so seldom seemed at all likely so to work out. She could never believe that any plan of his would be successful. Pity had been her dominant emotion when he had so eagerly, and as she believed so futilely, made the suggestion to her before the trial. Now that he had come to final ruin, she felt that she must do everything in her power to comfort him. It had been as if she were sitting by his death-bed, unable to refuse him anything. Afterwards she had been bound by her promise and by a sense of horror at the thought that if, by one chance in ten thousand, he did succeed in escaping, he should find that she had failed him. And he *had* been right in two particulars: five years' sentence and his ultimate place of confinement.

Moreover, the moment she had heard those guns, a feeling of certainty had come to her; the fantastic plan had suddenly taken shape as a somewhat terrifying reality; and her mind for the first time had begun automatically to employ itself with a host of practical details.

She glanced at the clock and noted that three-

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quarters of an hour had elapsed since they had heard the signal announcing the escape of a prisoner, time enough—even if his escape had been announced at once—for him to have covered those four miles.

‘I suppose, ma’am, I’d better . . .’ Sarah began again, and broke off suddenly, arrested by a sound that came to them from the next room, the sound of heavy feet on the floor, followed immediately by the thud of a smartly-closed sash window.

Mrs. Trevarrian put her hand to her side, and leaned against the jamb of the window. Now that he was, without doubt, actually in the house, the final absurdity of the plan revealed itself to her in a flash of realisation. What possible chance had she of concealing his identity should the prison officials come to search the cottage? He was an absurdly bad actor. She remembered vividly his appearance as the comic housemaid in that play they had got up. She had thought, then, that he had had no sense of the part; and what would he make of it when called to play it again for so high a stake? He had neither the ability nor the nerve to carry the thing through.

‘You’d better go into the kitchen, Sarah,’ she said. She wanted no witness, not even this dear, faithful Sarah, to her first remeeting with her husband. That deep sense of pity she had suffered two years earlier, had given place momentarily to a feeling of irritation. Why should she have this awful complicity in his escape thrust upon her? For presumably she would be liable to prosecution for harbouring and abetting him. And she did not feel equal to the task. If the cottage should be searched, she would break down. Even

now, her heart was beating as if it would suffocate her.

As Sarah left the room, Mrs. Trevarrian collapsed into a chair. She ought, she knew, to go to her husband and help him to disguise himself. He was sure to make a mess of it without her. She had had to do everything for him when he had played the part in those theatricals. But she had not the strength to rise from her chair. She felt utterly limp and helpless. She was terribly afraid that she was going to faint. At any cost, she must relax for a few minutes. If he called to her, she would go to him.

That terrifying palpitation of her heart had died down and the sense of weakness was passing when she was roused by a light tap at the door.

'Yes, yes; come in,' she called to him. It was so like him, she reflected, to play the fool at a desperate crisis like this. But the reflection helped to brace her. Everything now depended upon her, and she dare not fail him.

The door opened and a figure in cap and apron came into the room with an effect of shy hesitation; a figure that most convincingly looked the part of a housemaid. As a disguise it was certainly admirable, but the man who wore it was surely not her husband.

She rose to her feet with an exclamation of surprise. 'What's this? Who are you?' she asked. Just for the moment, the absurd fancy came to her mind that nearly two years of prison had altered him out of all recognition.

'I'll explain, ma'm, direc'ly,' the stranger replied. 'It's quite all right, quite all right. But first—you'll excuse me, ma'm, but we got to be quick over this job—'ave you by any chance a bit o' make-up for me eye-

brows and eyelashes, to darken 'em, you know. If you 'aven't I'll have to do me best with a bit o' burnt cork.'

'Yes, I have a box of theatrical make-up upstairs,' she said, 'and a stick of Kohl, but . . .'

'If you wouldn't mind gettin' it quick, ma'm,' the convict returned. 'You see I'm that fair, and with this dark wig an' all. . . . To say nothin' of the chance o' bein' reckernised.'

It was true that he was very fair-haired and fair-skinned, and his face looked as smooth as a woman's; excellent recommendations for carrying off that disguise, once an adjustment had been made between the blonde eyebrows and the brunette wig.

'But,' she began again, and then left the room quickly and ran upstairs to fetch the Kohl pencil. She must decide later what she was going to do in the face of this new problem. For the moment the little man's effect of tremendous urgency and haste was irresistible. Her husband, too, was rather a little man; but there all physical likeness between the two ceased. And already she suspected that this stranger had some of the abilities her husband so obviously lacked.

That suspicion was further confirmed as she watched him two minutes later, deftly and rapidly darkening his eyebrows and eyelashes before the pier-glass in the sitting-room. He had slender, clever fingers, and all his movements were swift, effective, certain. When he had satisfied himself, he stooped down, slipped the Kohl pencil behind the register of the chimney with a muttered 'Mustn't leave it where they'd find it, but we may want it again,' and then lifting his skirt, carefully wiped his fingers on his petticoat.

'And now perhaps you will be kind enough to explain,' Mrs. Trevarrian said.

'Yes, ma'm. If you will just sit down, and I'll stand inside the door, like as if you'd rung for somethin'. Never know that they mayn't come peerin' in at the winders, you know. Best to be prepared in any case.'

The change that had been made in his appearance and expression by the use of the Kohl was astonishing. The pale eyebrows and eyelashes that had been almost invisible had now become a distinctive feature; and he looked not only like a housemaid, but like a distinctly pretty one. Moreover as he stood, meekly, by the door, telling his story, he showed a truly remarkable sense of the part he was playing, a part so strangely in contrast to his spoken words.

'But fust, about the things I took off, ma'm,' he began.

'That's all right,' Mrs. Trevarrian said. 'Sarah . . .'

'Oh! yes, I've 'eard about 'er,' he put in.

'I heard her go in and fetch them,' Mrs. Trevarrian continued. 'She's going to burn the clothes and bury the shoes in the garden. We—we'd made all our plans.'

He nodded, paused a moment as if he rapidly considered any other precautions that ought to be foreseen, and then continued:

'Now, about Mr. Conyngham, yer 'usband, ma'm . . .'

'I'm known here as Mrs. Trevarrian,' she interposed quickly.

'Oh! Mrs. Trevarrian,' he repeated. ''E never tole me that. Mrs. Trevarrian? Yes. I got that. Well, about yer 'usband, ma'm, the truth is 'e turned

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pious, if you know what I mean. Got in with the chaplain, and all that. Jus' recently, that's to say. It was before that as he put me up to all 'is plans. We gets ways o' talkin' to one another, y'know; and some o' the warders ain't too pertickler if you got good chara'ters like 'im and me had; an' one time an' another he blew me the 'ole bunk. Talked o' my comin' with 'im if we struck it lucky; tho' I knew that'd be no go. 'Owever, after he turned pi, he gave me the auction as it was all orf so far as 'e was concerned, and said as I might try it sometime on me own if I got a lucky charnce; an' 'ere I am, ma'm, with a fair 'ope o' puttin' the job through, if you don't go back on me.'

Yet that, she realised, was what she ought to do. She had made no promises to this man, and why should she incriminate herself by aiding his escape? But she was temperamentally incapable of taking the side of the strong against the weak. Had she not married Phillip against the wishes of his family and her own, with some sentimental idea of protecting him? And had she not done her best to stand by him, during all those ten miserable years?

'But do you think you could carry it off, if they came to look for you?' she asked.

'Trust me, ma'm,' he replied eagerly. 'I was in service myself, first go off, as boy in a big 'ouse. 'S'long as you don't go back on me. . . .'

'Very well,' she agreed. 'But I must explain to Sarah. You see she will be expecting Mr. . . . my husband. . . .'

She was interrupted by a sharp but almost inaudible

'tst!' from the figure by the door, followed by a whisper of ' 'Ere they come. Soon's they ring I'll go an' let 'em in.' Then raising his voice he went on: 'Sarah says would you like 'er to do you a bit of toast with yer tea, ma'm?'

As he spoke, Mrs. Trevarrian became aware of a passing shadow that momentarily darkened the sitting-room window, followed almost instantly by a rough, almost brutal, knock at the front door. Her heart was beginning to thud again, but she made a great effort to control her nerves. The escaped convict had already left the sitting-room. Indeed, almost in the same moment, as it seemed to her, she heard his voice in the little passage-hall.

'You 'aven't caught them, then? Well, all I can say is, I 'ope you will. I dassent sleep up 'ere to-night if you don't; out on the moor with on'y us three women in the place. Must 'a been pretty careless some o' you, if you ask me, to let 'em go. 'Ow many was there got away?'

The answer was given in a gruff bass voice. 'You mind your own business, my girl, Who lives here?'

And then: 'Well, I like that! Mind my own business, indeed. An' 'oose business will it be if I'm murdered in my bed, I'd like to know. I come from London, I do, and I'm fed up with this place a'ready. . . .'

What a nerve the man had, Mrs. Trevarrian reflected. But, of course, he was right. The least appearance of shrinking from observation might attract suspicion. But she had her own part to play. She must support him, accept the one he had so plainly offered. It would not be so difficult. She felt braced by the man's courage.

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She went out into the passage, and 'That will do, Emma,' she said curtly. 'You can go to the kitchen.' And then to the two warders who stood gun in hand at the entrance, she said: 'I can guess, of course, why you are here. You can come in. But we haven't seen anyone.'

'Emma', with a toss of her head and an effect of threatening rebellion later, took herself off.

'A matter of form, ma'm,' said the elder of the two warders, removing his cap. 'We don't of course suspect you of harbouring the escaped convict . . .'

'There was only one, then?' Mrs. Trevarrian put in with a thought to that suggestion she had overheard. How was she to know that only one convict had escaped?

The warder hesitated a moment before he said: 'There was only one got away, ma'am.'

'And you want to search the premises?'

'Just in case he's hiding here without your knowledge, ma'am. It's been done before.'

And indeed the rapid search was almost perfunctory, although Mrs. Trevarrian's nerve trembled again as they entered the little room on the ground floor in which the convict had changed his clothes. Suppose Sarah had overlooked something? But the room was in perfect order, the window closed and fastened; no sign of footmarks on the carpet.

'My maid's room,' she explained.

'And is this all?' the warder inquired.

'Except the kitchen,' she said.

'And the outhouses?'

'There's a coal-shed and a garage outside,' she told them.

In the kitchen, Sarah was bending over the fire making toast and 'Emma' sitting with her back to the

window, was engaged with a piece of Sarah's knitting. She rose with an effect of slightly rebellious reluctance, as the search-party entered, but continued to knit.

The two warders glanced carelessly round the little kitchen, but the regard of the younger one dwelt for a moment upon 'Emma'; suspiciously, Mrs. Trevarrian thought, until she recognised with a thrill half of admiration and half of amusement that 'Emma' was actually having the effrontery to 'make eyes' at him.

'An' 'im a married man with two children,' was his soft comment as the two big men passed out through the scullery to examine the outhouses. He seemed positively to be enjoying himself. His eyes were shining and his mouth curved into a grin of almost childlike glee.

They did not have to speak to the warders again, though they saw them through the kitchen windows cross the garden at a trot and turn in the direction of the village. The fog had all gone now and the sun was shining in a clear sky.

'Seems as if they're in a bit of an 'urry,' Emma remarked. 'Well, good luck to 'em. An' now, ma'am, question is what to do next? The way I been lookin' at it is this, either I got to stay with you for a month till me 'air grows and I get off quiet in the car, disguised as a gentleman, or else I got to do a bunk as quick as I can, dressed up as Emma. Once I get to London, I'm all right. I got friends there as'll 'elp me. The point is whether I can risk the train journey, supposin' you was to drive me to the station and see me off?'

Sarah, with a very dour expression, was standing by the range, looking at her mistress as if waiting to be addressed, and it was to her that Mrs. Trevarrian spoke first.

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'What do you think, Sarah?' she asked.

'We couldn't keep him here a month, ma'am,' she replied promptly.

'Sarah's got the spike with me for spoilin' 'er knittin',' 'Emma' commented. 'I on'y knows one stitch as me aunt taught me when I was a nipper, but I can do that to beat the band.'

Sarah did not deign to reply to that. 'And what's happened to the master, ma'am?' she continued. 'Suppose he was to come after all?'

'It seems that there's no chance of that,' Mrs. Trevarrian said. 'He has decided to give up any attempt to escape.'

'Well, you've only his word for that, ma'am,' Sarah replied, with a brief nod of contempt in the direction of Emma.

That was true, Mrs. Trevarrian reflected, but Emma gave her no time to think about it. 'Sarah's right as usual,' he put in quickly. 'Wouldn't never do for me to stop 'ere a month. So the best thing is fer me to get away soon as possible. They'd be less suspicious of me dressed as Emma, this evenin', than they would be after they'd 'ad a bit o' time to think about it. Been a bit too saucy, I 'ave, see? An' got the sack double-quick. My little bit in the 'all jus' now led up to that all right. Next point is, what about a few outdoor things; better not be too cheeky or I shall 'ave the porters makin' love to me, and this journey I'd like to keep meself to meself, like. An' by rights, I ought to 'ave a trunk o' some sort. Now, what about trains?'

It appeared that there was a train for Plymouth that left Yelverton at 6.46 which would give them more

than an hour to make all the necessary preparations and get to the station in Mrs. Trevarrian's little car.

III

It was a lovely evening. The cold wind from the north had died away and the air was warm and fragrant with the scent of gorse. Mrs. Trevarrian, driving back alone from Yelverton station, drew up as she topped the rise and looked out across the broad swell of the moor with a little sigh of regret.

The comedy of Emma's departure had been played without a hitch. The station had been 'watched' only by a couple of local policemen, who had permitted them to pass with hardly a glance, though 'Emma', with the cool effrontery that had distinguished her conduct throughout, had very noticeably looked at them. 'It's skulkin' and lookin' as if you was tryin' to 'ide yerself as draws attention to you,' he had confided to Mrs. Trevarrian in the course of their short wait on the station. 'Look 'em in the heye and they never suspect you. Is me 'at on straight, ma'am?'

It was not on his account that Mrs. Trevarrian had sighed. She had little doubt that he would make good his escape and she could not help feeling glad in the knowledge of his freedom, even though her conscience was already reproaching her for the part she had played in helping him. For the more she reflected on the incidents and the conversation of the past two hours, the more convinced she felt that cool and clever though the man undoubtedly was, he was also a dangerous criminal, a man who would stick at nothing if he were thwarted. And yet she had, as it were, turned him loose on the world, in all probability to pursue his

career of crime. No, she saw very clearly now that she ought not to have done it.

But her sigh had been due less to self-reproach than to self-pity. Alone there in the golden sunshine of that lovely moor, she was all too painfully aware that life held for her little promise of happiness. That hint she had received of her husband's newly-found piety had not served to reassure her. When he learnt that her aunt, whose name, among others, he had forged to a cheque, had died and most forgivingly left her a small fortune, he would cast his newly-found piety to the winds. He was a gambler by nature, and an unlucky gambler—possibly because he had not the ability to gamble sanely—and unless she obtained a legal separation from him, he would run through her money in a twelvemonth. And that she would not do. It had become a religion to her to stand by him whatever happened. She neither respected nor loved him, but she believed it to be her duty to do all that was humanly possible to save him from himself.

With an even deeper sigh, she let in the clutch and continued her way home, forgetful now even of the beauty of the evening.

On her way through the village she saw Mrs. Holmleigh coming out of the Vicarage, and stopped the car. She had been rather rude to Mrs. Holmleigh that afternoon, and owed her an apology.

And Mrs. Holmleigh on her side, with all that recent aspersion of Mrs. Trevarrian's sanity behind her, confronted now with this quiet, well-mannered apology coming from a woman whom she very grudgingly admitted was better bred than herself, suffered a painful twinge of conscience.

'Oh! really, no! I quite understood,' she said effusively. 'It must be terribly trying to the nerves living all alone there up on the moor, and with that fog and the signal of the convicts' escape and all. No, really, I can quite understand.' She lowered her voice and rested her hand on the side of the car as she added: 'And such a dreadful man to be loose, too. I suppose you've heard?'

'No, I—I've heard nothing,' Mrs. Trevarrian said with a sudden catch in her breath that Mrs. Holmleigh attributed to fear, and sought thrillingly to accentuate as she continued:

'It was the Vicar who got the news first, and I'm sure I don't know if I've really the right to pass it on, though I suppose all the world will know to-morrow morning—but the ghastly fact is that two men tried to get away in the fog and one of them——' she paused dramatically—'actually murdered the other! Isn't it altogether *too* horrible to think of? And so purposeless, apparently. There doesn't seem to have been any reason for it. Smashed in his head with a stone! Sheer brutality as far as one can see. And they say, too, that the man who was killed had been a gentleman once—*quite* good family—but he got five years' penal servitude for forgery. A married man, too. Well, I don't want to be cynical, my dear, but it does look rather as if it must be a lucky escape for his poor wife, whoever she may be. . . .'

There certainly must have been something very queer about Mrs. Trevarrian. She started the car so quickly and unexpectedly that poor Mrs. Holmleigh was nearly knocked down.

THE WIND AND MR. TITTLER



NEATNESS, some people said, was Mr. Tittler's one positive virtue. His negative virtue was that he had no vices. Personally, Mr. Tittler had a reasonably good opinion of himself, and greatly admired his own gift for precision. 'I am one of those people'; he always explained with an apologetic simper to any new acquaintance; 'who have a weakness for being precise.' He did not add, 'in important matters', because in his case the addition would have been superfluous, since to Mr. Tittler, all matters were important enough to be treated seriously and precisely.

He had done well to buy a house in Moorage before the war. The place was going up; more visitors were coming every summer and the price of land was steadily mounting. But the wisdom of Mr. Tittler's selection was shown in his choice of society rather than of a profitable investment. Moorage had quite a large resident population, and most of them were of Mr. Tittler's own sort: retired people, Army people, respectable people. It was a society that knew its own mind; and Mr. Tittler had one or two near rivals for leadership in the exercise of the prime virtue of what he called precision.

The people of Moorage were very well satisfied with themselves before the wind came.

It was no ordinary wind, and it blew all over the world, though not everywhere from the same quarter.

In one place it was a 'bise', in another a 'mistral', in another a 'sirocco'; beginning in every case as a mere aggravation of a local nuisance that made decent people uncomfortable. In Moorage it was an East Wind, of the kind that they often had to put up with for a few days in April.

Mr. Tittler accepted its coming as a familiar nuisance with which he knew exactly how to deal. He assured himself that the central heating was working properly, kept his windows shut, and stayed indoors as much as he could. When he went out in his thickest overcoat and muffler, he treated the wind as bluffly as it treated him; spoke of it to any friend he met on the front as 'our' East wind, and said that he supposed it was 'one of the things we have to put up with now and again'. The East wind might have been a tiresome relation come on a short visit.

But on this occasion the visit was not so short as usual and the wind continued and grew stronger. It began to upset Mr. Tittler's gift for precision. In the midst of his orderly regular life he would suddenly find himself on the very brink of a new thought, an abominable heresy that would have ruined his reputation in Moorage for ever: Suppose life was not what they had always believed it to be? And at night, when he should have been putting himself to sleep as usual by doing sums in his head, that absurd supposition would come to torment him with the illogical persistence of a nightmare.

He even began to find himself saying rather odd things to his friends. When he met Miss Finchley on the front one afternoon, and they attempted a brief conversation under the lee of one of the shelters, he

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ventured the remark that if this wind kept on much longer they would have to find a new way of life. He blushed to remember that, when he was snugly home again taking his tea, but at the time it had seemed quite a natural thing to say, and Miss Finchley had shivered and said: 'Oh! let's hope it won't keep on much longer,' just as if there were a reasonable probability of that most unlikely occurrence. Indeed, it seemed as if everyone was becoming slightly affected, a little queer in the head.

It was the day after that meeting with Miss Finchley and the sixth day of the Easterly gale, that all the shelters on the promenade were blown down, together with the bandstand and two cafés. Mr. Tittler, more wrapped up than ever, went out in the afternoon to see the wreckage. He met one or two of his friends out there, bowed and staggering under the force of the gale, but no conversation was possible, and he thought that they were all looking very queer indeed.

The sea was very rough. All that could be seen in face of the flying spume was one vast tumultuous expanse of white foam under a dead grey sky. Mr. Tittler did not like it at all. It wasn't, he thought, natural; and he detested all abnormal unnatural things. He was very thankful to get home into the shelter of his snug comfortable house with the central heating. In that retreat he could reassure himself that the world at large was still pursuing its reasonable, expected course.

But that night, the wind broke all the laws of natural decent life, blew in several of Mr. Tittler's windows and went ramping about his house, upsetting the furniture, tearing the curtains, flicking all sorts of

things away into the depths of space and stirring up the accumulated muddle of a lifetime.

Mr. Tittler was terribly upset. He had to get his breakfast anyhow next morning, for his cook and housemaid had taken refuge in the cellar and refused to come out. They told Mr. Tittler that this was the end of the world, and when about ten o'clock the roof came off and the walls began to fall down, he was inclined to believe them.

He dared not stay there any longer, but where was he to go? The wind was worse than ever. All the trees and shrubs in his garden had gone after the roof and the other things. Very soon there would be nothing left at all. His house would be gone, Moorage would be gone, all the world swept level and flat; everything reduced to a condition of primitive equality.

The cook and housemaid had already been buried in the ruins of the falling house when Mr. Tittler forsook the last dangerous fragment of shelter that was left to him, and stepped out into the open.

And the wind caught hold of him, stripped him naked, and carried him away into the depths of space with all the other rubbish. Though what the wind hoped to do with Mr. Tittler now that it had caught him, no one can say.

LAUGHTER AND TEARS



Not every employer, even though he be as famous as Mark Austin, is a hero to his secretary.

When May Colgrove, trembling with pride and excitement, confided to Iris Green, who was not exactly a friend but the nearest thing to a confidante the lonely May possessed, that she was going to leave the office at the end of the month in order to act as secretary to the famous Mark Austin, Iris said: 'Oh! my dear, you'll soon get sick of that, I can tell you. These writing people are just nothing but a bag of whims, my dear, awful! There's no pleasing them.'

Just for a moment, May's tremulous pleasure was a little damped by that reply; but when she recalled it later, in the solitude of her bedroom, she saw how foolish she had been to allow it to shadow for a moment the pride of her achievement; the exquisite promise of her future.

Iris had no taste in literature; of course. Moreover, she was in other ways quite the wrong sort of girl to be secretary to a man of letters. She could not worship, could not conceive the ideal that had now thrilled May for twenty-four hours, the ideal of serving as a hand-maiden in the Temple of Literature. She had, too, such a practical conception of the ritual that she would follow: 'to be always attentive, pliant, painstaking, scrupulously careful; forgetting nothing, overlooking nothing: to be neat and cheerful, not with a specious

brightness of manner but with the serene contentment of one who finds her chief pleasure in her work . . . ' That was a quotation from the orders that May had set herself. She had typed them out and learnt them by heart, the evening before, when she returned from the glory of her first sight of Mark Austin and of receiving his approbation.

He had hardly looked at her; certainly would not recognise her if he met her in the street, but that was all as it should be; in keeping with the fine detachment of his thoughts, the separation from the small affairs of every day, proper to one who, as she knew from *Who's Who*, had been educated at Rugby, was a scholar of Balliol College, Oxford, had won the Newdigate Prize, taken first class honours, and was the author, at thirty-five years of age, of four books of criticism and three novels, all esteemed as being in the very front rank of contemporary literature.

In return she had hardly dared look at him; had given hardly more than the one glance necessary to confirm the fact that he was like his photographs, with a big head, bold features and vigorous, unruly dark hair.

May looked once more at her typed ritual, pausing on the final paragraph: 'never to intrude one's own personality, private opinions or affairs'. She picked up a pencil and underlined that golden rule for the handmaiden of one who was at least chief high priest if he were not actually the god of the Temple in which she had been so wonderfully chosen to serve.

After that, she sighed deeply and underlined the sentence a second time.

For there was a secret, a profound and heart-shaking

secret, in May Colgrove's life. It reposed, exquisitely typed, in a portfolio at the bottom of the locked trunk under the bed. Its name was *Faithful Janet*, and it had taken May the best part of two years—evenings, Sundays and holidays—to write. She had written it with blood and tears. It had been at once her solace and her agony. But, as she now admonished herself, shaking her head and setting her mouth as if she were a governess arguing with a foolish pupil—it was not really *good*; not *clever*; not at all the sort of novel that Mark Austin could possibly approve.

It was the story of a stenographer-typist who bore a strong family resemblance to May Colgrove, both in appearance and character; and who had particularly well marked her virtue of faithfulness. But Janet's history was determined by a great romance, as May's had not been hitherto. Janet from childhood had loved a man who was, from the world's point of view perhaps, unworthy of her. From the outset, and even as a child, she had been his friend and adviser; his good angel; though unhappily, in his rash impetuosity, he always failed to carry her good advice into effect. Even when he disastrously married the wrong woman, Janet remained his friend; and it was she alone who could bring him any comfort when his impetuosity at last landed him in the final disaster that had for its awful consequence a sentence of two years imprisonment. He was not really wicked, only terribly careless, reckless; and so blind. Janet, as always, was the only person who truly understood. When he came out of prison, his wife would not see him. There was nothing for him then but to emigrate, and Janet, risking everything, went with him, as a sister, for even then he had

never dreamt of making love to her. It was not until they had been two years in Canada and his wife had been killed in a motor-accident that Janet's faithfulness momentarily failed. He was safe, now, she believed, a changed man; and when she suspected him of falling in love with the daughter of a neighbouring farmer, she could endure no more. She ran away. It was three months later, and she was working as a stenographer in New York, when he found her; having realised from the moment he discovered her note of farewell that life without her could be for him nothing but an empty, meaningless void.

No one but May herself had ever seen a line of that story. She loved it and yet she was ashamed of it. She wanted to write a really *clever* novel; had, indeed, made a determined attempt, labouring and rewriting with weariness and pain until the task had become utterly repugnant. It was almost as if, she whimsically thought, something fought against her; while with the other book it had been as if something had wonderfully helped her—only to produce a work that she could never dare show to Mark Austin.

Yet, for two days after she had answered his advertisement she had foolishly dreamed of doing just that very thing. Authors of May's kind, cannot resist the pleasure of these foolish dreams. She had made such a delightful story of it in her mind, of her own humility, the great man's gentleness, his subtle appreciation of something fine in her book that she herself had but dimly hoped might be found there. And then, when she had actually been sitting in his presence, the dream had burst like an absurd pretty bubble. She had known instantly how utterly impossible it would be ever to

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show *Faithful Janet* to Mark Austin. He might be kind—his eyes were kind and he had a gentle mouth—but he was, before all things, an intellectual. There could not be a doubt of that.

She underscored for the third time the essential duty of the faithful acolyte: 'Never to intrude one's own personality, private opinions or affairs.'

The future held for her now, she decided, but one ambition: perfect service. It was probably all that she was fit for; and curiously enough, the prospect brought to her a sense of release from an onerous and unpleasant duty. She would no longer have to struggle with that detestable book which was to have been a 'real piece of literature', as most of her many imaginary critics had said. She had often had to invent criticisms in order to encourage herself to the tedious task.

In a fit of thankful renunciation she got out the manuscript and carefully destroyed it, feeling still happier when it was done. But then it occurred to her that her renunciation would not be complete, her vows not properly made, until *Faithful Janet* had been destroyed, too.

Slowly and with many reluctant sighs, she drew her trunk from under the bed, unlocked it, produced and opened the portfolio. Virgin white and exquisitely neat, the most perfect piece of typing she had ever done, the manuscript of the third and final draft of *Faithful Janet* lay before her. Could she destroy it, she asked herself? Would it not bleed under her hands; cry aloud; protest for its life?

And then, suddenly, a way of escape presented itself to her; another form of consecrating herself, equally drastic but less cruel. She could not kill this precious

worthless thing; but she could renounce it. She would send it to a publisher; under a false name. She had a feeling that when other, careless eyes had read it, it would no longer belong to her.

After some thought, she decided to call herself, for the purposes of publication only, Mary Talbot, which had been the name of the heroine in the other horrible novel she had just destroyed.

It may have been intuition or it may have been ignorance, but she never doubted that *Faithful Jane* would be accepted by the publisher to whom she sent it. It was, she thought, the masterpieces, such as the novel she had been unable to write, that were refused.

II

May began her new, her almost sacred, duties at the beginning of February.

Mark Austin and his mother lived in a charming little house, not far from Guildford, surrounded by blue hills with patches of dark pinewoods, and perched on a southward slope that even so early in the year, was often gladdened by the sun. To May, who had never lived either in the country or in so charmingly appointed a house, 'Pinehill' seemed a sort of paradise. It had even just that touch of austerity which a paradise must surely have if it is not to become a thing of cloying sweetness. The furniture, the plain walls, the simple cretonnes, though satisfying in line and colour, were just a shade severe; altogether in keeping with the intellectual atmosphere. The spirit of the house, so May felt, was one of lofty serenity; and after her bed sitting-room and the office in Bucklersbury, it was, as she said to herself in a kind of ecstasy on waking the

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first morning, 'much, much too good to be true'. After a few years of this life, living in this high clear air, and gathering wisdom from Mark Austin and his mother, she might perhaps be ripe to undertake that masterpiece. It had been foolish, and presumptuous of her to attempt it before.

Above all, from the first moment, she felt at home there. Even her uniform of dark grey linen toned admirably with the general colour scheme and intellectual atmosphere. Iris Green had often laughed at the notion that she wore those dresses because they were economical and did not show the dirt, insisting that that was all 'my eye', and that May knew perfectly well just what best suited her rather tall figure, brown hair and grey eyes.

Mrs. Austin complimented her on her taste, the first morning at breakfast. 'I'm so glad to see, Miss Colgrove,' she said, 'that you have the good sense and the good taste to wear what suits you rather than what happens to be the prevailing fashion. Some of my son's secretaries have been really terrible young women, haven't they, Mark?'

'All,' returned Mark Austin, without looking up from his letters.

'Well, dear, perhaps not all,' his mother mildly protested, adjusting the glasses on her high-bridged nose. 'Miss Featherstone could hardly be called a terrible young woman.'

'Not young, perhaps, but very terrible,' Mark Austin commented.

'But that would be in another category of terrible-ness; wouldn't it?' Mrs. Austin enquired.

'I only recognise one category and that's incom-

petence,' was the answer. 'They were all incompetent. Would you mind beginning work immediately after breakfast this morning, Miss Colgrove? I have been without a secretary for three weeks and there are arrears.'

May followed him to the Library a few minutes later, inwardly uttering a prayer that she, too, might not be found incompetent. 'To be always attentive, pliant, painstaking, scrupulously careful; forgetting nothing, overlooking nothing,' she murmured to herself.

But it was not so easy.

His preliminary instruction, though it certainly summed up several essentials of her own ritual, had precisely the opposite effect of that he obviously intended.

'Now, Miss Colgrove,' he began, 'I want you to try, as far as possible, to obliterate yourself. I hate the feeling of another personality when I'm working. I am going to regard you and I want you to regard yourself as a machine.'

May immediately felt snubbed and self-conscious. Her notion of the ideal handmaid had not been of anything remotely resembling a machine. In this Library—it was the largest, most comfortable and sunniest room in the house; and she had already named it for herself as 'the Temple'—she had been prepared to be the perfect disciple; which is quite a different thing from being a mixture of dictaphone and typewriter.

'I will try, Mr. Austin,' she said meekly. She did not, then, reflect on the possibility that every one of his previous secretaries, though with less lofty ideals, might have been all too willing to become his disciples.

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'To be *competent*,' May thought to herself, adding a new clause to the ritual. She had her pad on her knee, and her eyes fixed on it; lost in her determination to be competent and doing her best to obliterate herself; when she was startled by Mark Austin's voice saying irritably: 'Oh! take the thing, for goodness sake!'

She found then, that he was holding out a letter to her, had the air, indeed, of having been holding it out for some time. 'For the name and address'; he explained; 'I can't read 'em. Dear Sir or Madam, it may be a woman for all I can tell, if there is one thing in the world I detest more than another, it is answering the letters of any idiot who tries to curry favour with me by writing unintelligent eulogies of my novels. For the Lord's sake, Miss Colgrove, you're not taking all that down?'

She had, indeed, reached her own name before she realised her mistake.

She blushed all over. Even her well-kept white hands flushed to a sudden rose.

'Try to be intelligent,' he remarked curtly.

May realised that the first days of her training were going to be days of severe and ardent discipline. But she had her right cue at last: 'To be a competent and intelligent machine.' A strange contradiction in terms for a writer so careful of his metaphors as Mark Austin; for no machine could be intelligent, but . . .

'Miss Colgrove, are you giving me your attention?'

For two pins she could have burst into tears. What was the matter with her this morning?

After that, however, she did rather better; though when she was dismissed at half-past eleven to type the letters she had taken down, she was very uncertain if

she were going to be a success. The whimsical thought came to her that she had tried too hard. At the office in Bucklersbury, she had certainly been far more competent than she had been this morning. Probably it was the atmosphere of the house. It stimulated the imagination. Already she had the feeling that she might soon begin that masterpiece of hers. The story that came to her was, it is true, only another version of *Faithful Janet*, with a very, very different hero. But it was not the story that mattered so much as the way it was told. In this new book, her literary style was to be intellectual, a trifle austere.

She awoke from these thoughts to a realisation that instead of typing her letters she was sitting with her hands in her lap, staring out of the window from the little slip of the room on the first floor, set apart for her and the typewriter. She had never been tempted to dream like this in Bucklersbury; but there the atmosphere was one of strenuous endeavour; here it was cool, peaceful, philosophic. It made one want to think. Of all sorts of things. He was in some ways an *odd* man, Mark Austin! He never looked at you; not if you were his secretary, that is to say. He looked at his mother sometimes when he spoke to her. But his way of *not* looking at his secretary seemed to be deliberate; rather forced. Perhaps the last one had been very plain? Or, perhaps, he thought his present secretary rather plain?

But, all he wanted was that she should be an intelligent machine. And even now she hadn't began to type her letters!

That ritual of hers, had been silly. All she had to remember was that Mark Austin was a man of genius, and be patient. And work! Hard!!

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III

But as the days passed, she found that so far as her duties were concerned, her life at 'Pinewood' was going to be a very easy one. The truth was that there was hardly enough work for an experienced secretary. The Austins were evidently very well off and the secretary was just a luxury. She had taken to helping Mrs. Austin about the house, arranging the flowers, dusting the valuable china and things of that sort. She got on very well indeed with Mrs. Austin, who though quite appallingly clever (she appeared to have read everything that had ever been written), was very human and friendly and seemed to like talking to her.

The only difficult time was when she was alone with Mark Austin in the Library. Then she had to be immensely alert and yet unobtrusive. She must never make suggestions, because it 'put him out'. On the other hand it was necessary to exercise discretion. When his letters were unintelligible, as they often were, she had to correct them without telling him that she had done so.

Above all, she must never look at him, because he never looked at her, and was obviously embarrassed and uneasy when he knew that she was watching him. She found that difficult, because he was pleasant to look at. If he had not been a genius, he might have been, she thought, a general or an explorer or a President; a hero of action; a leader of men. She wondered why he disliked women so much that he could not bear to look at them? Perhaps, there had been some terrible tragedy in his past; some woman who had deceived him? May felt a vivid desire to write a novel about it;

not in the intellectual, austere manner; but as a kind of sequel to *Faithful Janet*, reversing the parts of hero and heroine.

She had been at 'Pinehill' nearly three weeks when she found lying beside her plate at breakfast one morning, a large envelope with the style and address of the senders printed on the face in bold type: 'Parkington & Co., Publishers, 33-39 Whiteladies Street, E.C. 4.'

She blushed and hastily turned it face downwards. Mrs. Austin was not down yet, but her son was already seated at the head of the table. For once, May was thankful that there was no fear of his noticing her. Even he must have wondered why she had so vividly blushed at the sight of that innocuous-looking business letter; although thank heaven, he could never have guessed that it was at the notion of anything to do with *Faithful Janet* intruding into that Temple of thought. It was a silly book and May was thoroughly ashamed of it.

Nevertheless, so that there should be no possible chance of his connecting the two things in his mind, she waited five days before she asked permission to go up to town for the afternoon, in order, though she did not say so to her employers—that she might settle things up with her publishers. Although, even when she was actually confronted with the firm of 'Parkington & Co.' in the person of a tired-looking middle-aged man who introduced himself as Walter Bright, May was still undecided whether or not she should permit *Faithful Janet* to be published. It would be altogether too terrible if the true authorship of that perfectly silly, sentimental book, came to be known at 'Pinehill'. So

that when Mr. Bright with a mechanical smile tepidly congratulated her on her achievement, and smoothed out the contract for her to sign, she said:

'Oh! I couldn't accept a contract like that, Mr. Bright. It's too ridiculous.'

May had not worked for three years as confidential secretary in a firm of attorneys, without learning all about contracts.

Mr. Bright started convulsively. 'Is there anything wrong with it?' he asked anxiously.

'Everything;' May said, and give him a neat but entirely devastating summary of the contract's deficiencies, concluding: 'And as a matter of fact, Mr. Bright, I'm not at all anxious to have the book published.'

Now Parkington & Co. were in a very big, if not a very select, way of business. It was one of those large advertising firms that think in terms of 'turn-over' rather than of literary merit. And it happened that they were short of titles for their Spring List, which was their chief reason for the acceptance of *Faithful Janet*—reported on by their reader as 'good enough' in the circumstances.

Mr. Bright hesitated and was not lost. 'Do I understand that you would like a royalty on a sliding scale?' he asked.

May began to feel a little sorry for him; he looked so very tired and worried; and it was this feminine compassion of hers for the quite undeserving Mr. Bright that finally settled the fate of *Faithful Janet*.

'After the sale of the first thousand copies,' she said; and Mr. Bright, who had not the least hope of selling more than that, was willing to go to astonishing

lengths of generosity in contemplating a sale of five thousand or more. Also, time being very important to him just then, as he wanted to get the first 'batch' out as soon as possible, he was greatly encouraged by May's informing him that it would not be necessary to send her proofs, as the typescript in his possession was absolutely flawless.

She insisted, however, on a clause in her contract that should protect her anonymity. In no circumstances whatever, was her real name to appear.

Mr. Bright was perfectly complacent.

'Oh! and please,' May concluded, 'when you have occasion to write to me, don't use envelopes stamped with your name.'

'We have no others,' protested Mr. Bright.

'Then you'd better buy some,' May said. 'They are quite cheap.'

'Oh! well, that's that,' May decided in the train going back to 'Pinehill', 'and there's an end of it.'

Though as she was presently to learn, that was not 'that', and was, indeed, only the beginning of it.

IV

May was very happy that spring. It was the first time in her life that she had had an opportunity to enjoy the delights of country earth expanding to the increased warmth of the mounting sun; to watch crocuses and snowdrops give place to violets, primroses and bluebells, the blackthorn to the may; to see the lovely mist of tender green thickening on the hedges and in the trees; the growing richness of colour in the garden. Everything was moving with quickened life and vigour, the small birds cheeped and chattered

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with new vivacity, the thrushes and blackbirds began to sing and there were nightingales in the wood; the rabbits on the hill scuttered and stamped from sheer exuberance; and even the sedate sheep in the fields seemed benevolently to smile approval at the clownish capering of their ridiculous lambs.

Every morning before breakfast May would stand at her open window absorbing the joy of it all, inhaling the sweet smells of the garden, and devoutly thanking Providence that she had been given a sight of this exquisite world; recalling, in order to delight in the joy of the contrast, how many springs she had been forced to spend in the gloom of dust-bitten City offices.

If only she could stay here for the rest of her life!

But sometimes she was all too fearfully aware that her chances of staying there even through the summer were terribly precarious.

Mark Austin was an unaccountable man, and he seemed to get worse instead of better as the spring ripened.

One lovely day of sunshine in late April, when they were working in the Library with the windows wide open, he stopped abruptly in the dictation of a letter, gave a kind of half-scared glance at May, and walked straight out into the garden. She waited patiently for half-an-hour, and then as he did not return went upstairs to get on with her typing, and from the window of her little room, she saw him re-enter the Library almost directly she had quitted it, just as if he had been waiting for her to go.

Two days later he seemed to be on the verge of giving her notice.

It began by her asking him to repeat a sentence

which, if he had dictated it rather unintelligibly, she would perhaps have understood if she had not been 'thinking'. (It may have been the effect of Mark Austin's genius, but that Library was quite an astonishing room for exciting the imagination.)

But truly it was not her fault that she should fail to hear him when he continued his dictation, looking out on to the garden with his back to her.

'I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Austin,' she pleaded, 'but I really cannot hear you when you stand there.'

'You distract my attention,' he said, without looking round. 'It's absolutely intolerable the way you distract my attention. You'd better go.'

'Go!' she repeated in terror.

'Upstairs,' he said.

That afternoon she decided to consult Mrs. Austin.

'I'm afraid,' she began, 'that Mr. Austin is not finding me very satisfactory.'

She hoped, fondly—that house was full of dreams—for a denial, but none came.

'It does seem such a pity,' was Mrs. Austin's reply.

'He has told you that he doesn't like me, then?' May said.

'It isn't that, exactly, my dear,' Mrs. Austin explained. 'To him, you see, you are just a woman secretary; which means that he begins with two reasons for mistrusting you.'

'I wonder that he doesn't have a man to do his work for him,' May commented, 'that would halve his dislike, anyway.'

'He says that he wouldn't insult any man by keeping him in comparative idleness like that,' Mrs. Austin replied.

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‘But he doesn’t consider it an insult to a woman?’

‘I’m afraid he doesn’t,’ Mrs. Austin admitted, adding after a short silence, ‘It would do him all the good in the world to get married.’

‘Do you really think so?’ May asked, trying vainly to picture the sort of woman Mark Austin would fall in love with.

‘But, I don’t think he ever will,’ Mrs. Austin continued. ‘He has always been in some curious way *afraid* of women.’

‘Has he?’ May replied. So her little romance of his having been crossed in love was quite without foundation. She was sorry for that. She felt that she had it in her to console rather than to attract.

‘Always,’ Mrs. Austin said.

‘Is that why he never looks at one?’ May asked.

‘Partly, perhaps,’ Mrs. Austin agreed. ‘But he was so unfortunate with his earlier secretaries. He—he complained that they “made eyes” at him. Even Miss Featherstone—who must have been nearly fifty.’

May laughed. The idea of trying to ogle Mark Austin seemed to her so utterly absurd.

‘But perhaps he only imagined that,’ Mrs. Austin agreed smiling. She was quite human and nice when there was no need to be clever.

‘He has never suggested that I . . . ?’

‘Oh! no, my dear,’ Mrs. Austin replied warmly. ‘I don’t think even Mark could ever accuse *you* of that.’

v

It was high June; Mark Austin though not less unaccountable than ever, had not yet given her notice, and she had almost forgotten that she was an author,

when glancing through the morning paper after lunch, May found herself suddenly confronted with the title of *Faithful Janet* in bold type, staring at her from a publisher's advertisement. The book was described as a 'brilliant first novel', and that description was followed by this quotation from *The Scrutator*, one of London's most literary periodicals, 'has kept us hovering between laughter and tears'.

Her first feeling was one of alarm. She was all alone in her little office, but she hastily crumpled up the paper, as if she were afraid of its being seen by the Austins. Surely it was not possible that the book was going to be a success? It had been published for two months and this was the first advertisement of it she had noticed. At the back of the bottom drawer of her wardrobe was a neat parcel containing six presentation copies that she had never unwrapped; and that had been her only reminder of the fact that that terrible book of hers had actually gone out to the world.

There had been a time when *Faithful Janet* had been very dear to her; but most of that tenderness had left her when she sent it away to be read by the callous reader of a commercial publisher. Of the remainder she had been completely cured during her five months residence at 'Pinchill'. No feeling for such a book as that could live in this atmosphere. Besides, Janet had been in love with a perfectly despicable creature; and May's face burned at the thought of Mark Austin's ever knowing that his devoted secretary could possibly have idealised such a man as that.

She glanced again furtively at the advertisement. How could the critic of *The Scrutator* have said that, she wondered. Was it possible that there had been any

mistake? Well, Mr. Austin always kept his copies of that highly intellectual periodical to which he was a frequent contributor; she would look up the original notice and see.

She found it after some difficulty under 'Notices in Brief,' and hardly knew whether to laugh at her publishers' iniquity or cry at the cruelty of the review she found there. The notice was certainly of the briefest. It ran: '*Faithful Janet* (Parkington & Co.), is an intensely sentimental work that may truly be said in a sense to have kept us hovering between laughter and tears; laughter at its naïveté, tears for its complete ineptitude'.

'Oh! well,' May decided, laughter having won the day, 'probably those terrible publishers of hers had thought it worth while to give the book one chance before it dropped out altogether, and that would be the last of it.'

But it was not at all like that.

Instead of dropping to the bottom of the long list of Messrs. Parkington's summer novels, *Faithful Janet* began to mount. Within a couple of weeks it reached the top of the list. And then went beyond it. Attained, in fact, the dignity of a special place apart from and above the common herd. And blossomed out into separate notices in other parts of the paper. While the publishers' adjectives rose to a shout; to a scream; before culminating in a kind of silence of supreme applause with the announcement: '*Faithful Janet*. The Book of the Year. Keeps all the world hovering between laughter and tears.'

By the middle of August there could no longer be any doubt, May had written a best-seller. And she

knew Mark Austin's opinion of the literary worth of best-sellers. She had heard him dismiss the whole genus with a single word: 'Trash!'

She thought seriously of handing in her resignation and going away to hide herself for ever, before the dreadful secret came out. She saw herself, a sweet-tempered, gentle spinster, rich but very unostentatious, full of good works, living in country not unlike the country about Pinehill. She knew she would be rich. Parkington & Co.'s advertisements enumerated the mounting thousands in tens and twenties; and a study of her contract told her that she was now earning more every week than she had previously earned in all her life put together.

But she did not want to leave the Austins; and she found the contemplation of devoted spinsterhood curiously unsatisfying.

And then at the end of August, Mark Austin suddenly announced that he was going to the lakes for a month to study the atmosphere for a new novel he had in contemplation.

So there was no need to do anything desperate before he returned.

When Mrs. Austin asked her if she, too, would care to go away she said she would greatly prefer to spend her holiday at 'Pinehill'.

Mrs. Austin was evidently greatly relieved and said that was 'sweet' of her. She was becoming quite a daughter to Mrs. Austin, who in return gave her all her confidence. May knew, by now, the complete story of Mark Austin's life, beginning with the appearance of his first tooth. He had been distinctly fractious as a baby. The first indication of his coming genius, perhaps?

It was not until Mark Austin was actually gone from the house that May came to a full understanding of all that his presence there had meant to her. She had persuaded herself that it would be a relief to be alone for a time; free from the pressure of that nervous tension when she was working with him; free from the necessity, at meals, or in the evening when he sometimes sat with them in the drawing-room after dinner, of appearing at her ease while she had constantly to remember never to embarrass him by a too direct glance; free from the continual dread that he might give her notice to leave at any moment.

But when all these trials had actually been removed, it seemed to her that they had been the very salt of her life.

And yet as the days passed she was stiffening herself in her resolution to leave 'Pinehill' before he returned. If she had had to face no more than the probability that he would continue to be unaware of her existence save as an intelligent machine, she might with her Faithful-Janet-like gift for humble adoration, have continued in her patient unobtrusive devotion to his genius. But any day the terrible secret of the authorship of that best-seller might come out, and then he would become aware of her individuality, only to despise her as a writer of 'trash'. And that would be more than she could bear.

Every evening she went up to a little arbour on the high ground behind the house to watch the sunset, and steel herself to the inevitable parting that lay before her. At those times, she tried to persuade herself that

all her regret was centred on leaving Mrs. Austin and 'Pinehill'. But in her heart she knew very well that both of these might be replaced, and that her real grief was for something unique and wonderful for which there could be no substitute. Oh! why had she written that silly, successful book? If she had not done that she might now be looking forward to years of placid happiness, learning daily by the sweet pain of discipline, to become the worthy disciple and help of a man of genius.

She was there on the eighth evening after Mark Austin's departure when she was immensely startled to hear the sound of his voice in the house. He had a rich, musical voice, and when he was excited the sound of it 'carried' quite remarkably. He was evidently excited now. What could he possibly have come back for three weeks too early? She had a palpitating, suffocating intuition that it had something to do with herself.

And then she saw him come violently out of the house and charge into the garden. With the habit of six months training she instantly lowered her eyes; but she was vividly aware of his every movement as he approached her. He had been running as he came out of the house, but he dropped into a quick walk as he mounted the garden; a walk that as he came nearer grew steadily slower and slower, until it seemed to her almost impossible that he would ever arrive at the summer house.

She did not look up when he spoke to her. It was no part of her duty to express surprise at any of his eccentricities.

'I have something exceedingly difficult to say, Miss Colgrove,' he said.

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Instinctively, she felt for the writing pad that was not there. 'If you would give me the general sense of it, Mr. Austin,' she replied, 'I could put it into shape later, perhaps.'

'Precisely,' he returned, but instead of beginning, as he usually did, to pace backwards and forwards and ruffle his hair, he stood perfectly still and said nothing more.

May became aware of a growing tensity in the situation that at last compelled her to raise her head. She found that he was looking at her, not with one of those quick half-furtive glances that she was accustomed to, but steadily, and it seemed, with a curious interest. Even when her eyes met his, he did not look away.

'Faithful, devoted eyes,' he murmured in a low tone.

The words were vaguely familiar to her. She thought they were a quotation from something, but at the moment she could not place them.

She tried to speak but no words came. She felt just then as if she were less a woman than one all-pervasive blush.

'At least let me begin by explaining that I have been in the vilest of tempers for over three months,' he said. 'And what made it worse was that I was ashamed to tell anyone, even my mother. Could you make room for me on that seat? I'd sooner not look at you again until you know the worst.'

There was ample room on the seat for half a dozen people, and May gave him the best part of it. She still found herself unable to speak.

'The thing was a mistake of the editor's in the first instance,' he continued when he had sat down, crossing his arms and gazing fiercely, defiantly at the sunset.

'But I was an infernal fool, with my experience, not to have foreseen the possibilities. However, God knows I've been punished enough for a moment of idiocy. I didn't, of course, read the book thoroughly. Another blunder; if it were nothing worse? I was annoyed that such a book should have been sent to me; and I committed the unpardonable sin of perpetrating a cheap sneer. Damnable, I admit, nothing less than damnable; but that first chapter, you know, was rather bad.'

May opened her mouth and wetted her lips with her tongue, but it was the palpitation of her heart that prevented her from speaking and no words came.

'You admit that yourself,' he said.

'You mean?' May managed to whisper.

'Naturally,' he replied. '*Faithful Janet*, the book I reviewed for *The Scrutator* with such direful results. No, no, I don't mean that,' he went on rapidly, 'I deserved to suffer. I am, yes in a way, I'm glad I have. And if that ghastly, utterly reprehensible notice of mine has helped in however small a way to increase the sale of the book, I'm glad, honestly, genuinely, most sincerely glad. I am, indeed, Miss Colgrove, I assure you I am. Peculiarly glad.'

'You see, I discovered only some twenty hours ago that you had written the book, yourself. My friend Bastable, the publisher, who was with me at Windermere, told me; or, at least, told me one or two things about the author that helped me to put two and two together. As a matter of fact, the thing came to me in a flash, quite blindingly. I should have started home, there and then, but it was after midnight and there was no train until this morning.'

'But why?' May put in.

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‘Good Heavens, my dear Miss Colgrove, but to apologise to you, of course,’ he said, still staring at the remains of sunset. ‘And more than that. I bought another copy of *Faithful Janet*; the book-sellers have nothing else in their windows, naturally; and read it on the train coming home; carefully this time. And I see now, what I so idiotically missed before, the wonderful human appeal of the book. Indeed, I am planning an article on it for *The Scrutator*. I am beginning to realise how blind I’ve been in this connection—to see that it is not the expression that matters half so much as the emotion that lies behind it. Your Janet is an adorable woman; adorable.’ He paused there for some seconds before he added. ‘Janet is yourself, of course. One recognises the portrait; even to the “faithful devoted eyes”. Please forgive me for referring to it.’

May became conscious as he stopped speaking that the world was immensely still and exquisitely beautiful. The sun had set, the colour had faded from the sky, and the world of wild life had ceased its orisons. She wanted to remain bathed in that lovely quietness, cherishing the thought of all the miraculous wonderful things he had said about her book, but more particularly about Janet being an adorable woman and a portrait of herself. She wanted to stay there thinking of these perfect things, for the rest of her life. But her magic moment of Nirvana was broken by the sound of the dinner bell, rung with an effect of agitation at the open drawing-room window as if the ringer was very pointedly trying to attract their attention after earlier failures.

May sighed deeply and looked up.

Mark Austin was still watching the place where the

sunset had been, but when she sighed, he said, without moving his head; 'There is just one question I should like to ask you, if you don't mind! That fellow that Janet is in love with? Is he—I hope I'm not intruding on your personal secrets; don't answer if you'd sooner not—but is he—still in prison?'

May gasped. 'Oh! but . . .' she began.

'Don't tell me if you'd sooner not,' he repeated.

'But he never *existed*,' May said. 'Never. And I detest the very thought of him. I can't imagine, now, how I ever came to write of such a detestable person.'

'Curious,' Mark Austin commented softly. 'Very strange. Nothing less than genius could have created so strong an impression of reality. I've been hating that man more than anyone I've ever known. I was wondering if you could be dissuaded from going away with him when he came out.'

'You wish then,' May summoned up courage to ask, 'to—to retain my services as your secretary?'

'Unless you would consent to some more permanent arrangement,' he said, adding in an almost inaudible voice as the silence and the darkness seemed about to envelop them altogether: 'Your book taught me that I was in love. I didn't realise it, until I had read it a second time.'

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As Mrs. Austin ascended through the gloom of the garden she made more noise than was really necessary.

'Ah! there you are, my dears,' she said as the two figures, very near together, came to meet her. 'And so everything is all right. I can't tell you how glad I am.

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Really I,' and her voice broke slightly; 'I don't know whether to laugh or cry.'

Mark Austin gave a sudden shout.

'For Heaven's sake, do either or both, my dear mother; but never, never quote that again,' he said.

THE MARIONETTES



THE old zest, he eagerly assured himself, was as keen as ever. This faint sense of *ennui*, of repetition, of approaching a task that not only he himself but, also, a host of other men and women before him had already undertaken and more or less successfully completed, was due to his being a little out of temper. Moreover, he had had something of the same reluctance on earlier occasions. All that was necessary to overcome it was to make a beginning. Once he had made a beginning, he would lose himself in the delight of creation; as he had always lost himself.

He threw back his head, opened his arms and inhaled a long deep breath. 'Creation,' he repeated defiantly, addressing the shadows that haunted the room.

They had always been there, some of them; but in the last few years they had multiplied beyond belief. And among the new ones, these shadows of things written and said by his jealous enemies had no place there at this time. It was they who were responsible for his loss of temper; which, in turn, had been the cause of the sense of *ennui* that was prolonging this agony of making a beginning. He would exorcise them as he had a year ago; although they had not then been so many or so insistent.

With his head well up and his chin thrust forward, he crossed the room with a deliberate, conquering step;

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lifted the great box from the corner and laid his figures one by one on the table in front of him.

First of all for his heroes. He had more than one. When he had separated them from the other dolls and propped them up as best he could side by side, he flattered himself that they made a very handsome troupe—a shade limp and shabby at the moment, naturally; but any one of them would strut as bravely as ever when he was re-dressed and re-wired. But which of them should he choose for his present purpose?

First of all came 'the Mixture', who had done splendid work in his day. He had two faces and could present either at will. Put the good one forward at the beginning and you had a kind of Steerforth; or, and this was perhaps the more effective method, you could begin with the bad one and then he would make an admirable Sydney Carton or Eugene Wrayburne. He could carry any sort of costume, too, any disguise. It was true that the more carping critics pretended to recognise certain tricks of manner, characteristic attitudes, gestures. . . . Put him on one side for the moment.

Next to him was that magnificent fellow, the Brute. He had carried all before him as a country gentleman, an Arab, an American business man, a Marquis; there was no end to his rôles. And in all of them he never failed to gain applause and sympathy by the use of the ingenious little piece of mechanism inside him that suddenly put his backbone out of joint and left him at the mercy of the heroine he had so grossly misused. The trouble was that, with a trick performance such as that, he was not easy to disguise. Whatever clothes, or whatever expression he wore, he was liable

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to be recognised finally by his machinery. Perhaps as a prize-fighter or even a nigger . . . ? Also, his machine was reversible. He could begin limp and then stiffen up with a click. No! Put him back.

Or there was this chap without a face; specially designed to wear any mask that could be found for him. His single characteristic was a sort of innate *goodness*. His original line had been the 'strong and silent' one, but that was to be avoided at all costs since it had been labelled. (Detestable things—labels. The resort of the unimaginative and incompetent!) He had done well, too, as the diplomatist in private life; wearing an eye-glass, Cayley Drummle parts. And as the eccentric rich man, concealing his wealth and playing Providence. . . .

Curse these shadows! They were leering over his shoulder.

What about the man of action? The chief objection against him was that his 'strong chin and the massive lines of his jaw' showed through every disguise, whether of politician, business man, explorer or merely soldier. Yet without those salient features, the fellow would have no character. . . .

Not a shadow had been exorcised. Indeed they seemed to be thickening. He got to his feet and began to plunge up and down the room, waving his arms to clear the air of these foolish masquerading phantoms that were coming between him and his work. He must face them. Hitherto, they had always vanished when he had faced them. He had put them to flight before now by the calm superiority of his half-tolerant smile. For what were they, after all? Ephemeral, bodiless things, a momentary blight on that which was by its

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nature eternally green; a canker that disappeared when it was examined. Already surely they were thinning out? He would go back to the table and try a heroine.

'Mary,' his favourite, was as fresh and sweet as ever, hardly a speck of dust on her. Her chastity, her simple womanliness, were perennial. In her plain, clinging white gown that suited her better than any fashion, she was not out of place in any period earlier than the last ten years or so. The colour of her eyes and hair might be altered a little from time to time, but otherwise there had never been any need to change her. In fact, she was in her very nature unchangeable. It was her chief quality. The disastrous thing was that she could not be dressed in a modern frock, because her feet were sewn to the bottom of her clinging white gown. She had never had any legs.

'Martha' might do, although she needed a very thorough overhauling. She had so often played secondary parts, coming to the front after 'Mary' had died, or the wicked first wife had run away; for she had not originally been designed to take the lead. Nevertheless she had done it on one or two occasions, always as a governess, a typist, or in some humble but ladylike employment. Perhaps she could by a daring stroke of originality, be tried as the daughter of an Earl or a Marquis? Her rather plain face with a mouth a little too wide for classical beauty, and well-opened grey eyes might be effective in that setting?

How strange it was—and how wonderful!—to reflect that within this box, containing at the most forty figures, lay the capacity for expressing every human emotion, every character! Here, before him, lay all the essential types apt to his purpose; the rest was merely

an affair of small differentiations. Give one of them a false nose and he became a new creature; a Cyrano de Bergerac it might be, or the villain of history; mechanically adopting a new attitude to consort with the new feature. Over-darken the eyebrows of Mary—although such an outrage was inconceivable—and her simple womanliness would give place to a more complicated kind. Shave down the chin of the man of action and he might become a poet. Yet, some essential element within them would remain unchanged.

But, after all, what did it matter? The real thing, the be-all and end-all, was the story. The characters were but the illustrations, adapting themselves to the artist's fancy of the part they were called upon to play; presenting certain fundamentals to guide him in his choice, but, within limits, pliant to his will. In the beginning, as to-day, their rôle was one of suggestion. It was from his regard of them that inspiration came. And after that they must be obedient to his control, steadfast or frail, as the situation demanded.

He set Lady Martha on a property chair and studied her. Was she to be on this occasion the means of his exaltation? He rather fancied that she might be. Already she exhibited the familiar signs of coming to life. That attitude into which she had casually fallen was characteristic. It expressed 'a great restraint, a latent capacity for passion, hidden beneath the reserve natural to one of her position and training'. That restraint was the symbol of the essential Martha—as difficult to trace, may be, as the theme of a Bach fugue, but always present, the very meaning of her existence.

Hastily he began to fumble among the other dolls, sorting, selecting, ranging them about the central

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figure. The effect was growing; the inevitable yet original story coming almost bewilderingly. But many minor modifications would be necessary in his troupe. He brought out his paints and his property-box.

All the alien, inimical shadows had fled silently from the room.

The artist was deep in the act of creation.

THE DEVIL'S OWN LUCK



IT was not my business to save young Wallace Edgar; but I did all I could, and in the end I was able to help him—by keeping silent.

He had come over from New York with a commission to write a Paris letter once a week, and called on me the day after his arrival with an introduction from the editor of an American magazine, who had advised him that I was the centre of the English literary coterie in Paris.

I took to him at once. He was a fine type: tall, square-shouldered, with fair, crisp hair. There was no mock-modesty about him, he had quite a good opinion of himself and his abilities; but, with one exception, he treated me and my views with respect. A nice frank, clean lad, I thought him; and hoped that the women of Paris would leave him alone. I do not for one moment suppose that they did; but I need have had no fear for him in that particular. He was in love with a girl in New Jersey, and was faithful to her, even when he was at his worst.

The exception to his otherwise deferential treatment of my views was in the matter of mysticism, and in a curious, roundabout way it was just that topic which brought him to me at the great crisis of his life. It was a subject that obviously irritated him; more than it should have done. I noted his impatience the moment I began to speak of it. He pursed his mouth and

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raised his eyebrows; and at the first opportunity he interrupted me and said:

‘Well, you’ll have to forgive me, sir; but in my opinion all that talk is just poppycock.’

I smiled my appreciation of his honesty and went on to speak of other things, more interesting to him. He was very young, not more than twenty-three or four, I guessed; and I have marked in other cases the same impatience with these matters among young men and women who are at heart afraid of the doctrine that no permanent good can be achieved without discipline of the spirit.

A month or two later, Edgar wrote a bitter but exceedingly clever article about the Gourdjieff School at Fontainebleau, and as he had actually mentioned me by name in connection with it, he brought it to show me before mailing it to his editor. That was another instance of his straightforwardness, and although in ridiculing the Fontainebleau School and associating my name with its teaching, he was doing me anything but a good turn with the American public; I let the article stand as it was, for his sake. I liked him as much as that. I fully appreciated the force of his argument, that without the personal touch, he might have had a difficulty in putting the article across.

He had been in Paris six months, had made many friends, and was establishing for himself a considerable reputation in New York, when I first began to have a suspicion that he was drinking more than was good for him. Now there are some men who can drink heavily and suffer very little harm; but there are others to whom drink is destruction of the spirit and, as a consequence, of the body. Edgar was one of the latter

type. There was something within him that despised his own weakness, the same force that he fought against with his clever mind when he displayed impatience with my mysticism. It is this conflict within the self that sometimes destroys such admirable men as young Wallace Edgar.

When he came over from New York he was an abstainer from all forms of alcohol. He was no fanatic, but he had been brought up in that faith and had never been tempted to break it. In Paris the temptation was all about him every hour of the day. He was an exception in a country in which the very children drink wine. His habit was regarded as peculiar. He was not chaffed about it, but men shrugged their shoulders, and looked at him suspiciously. It was a bar to intimacy with many people whom it was to his interest to know intimately. If he had been laughed at, persecuted, he would have stood out. You could not bully Wallace. But no one attempted to persuade him, and he probably first began to take his glass of wine now and again for purely business reasons.

He was having luncheon at my flat with a party of men, including a famous French writer whom he had particularly wished to meet, when my fears were first aroused. At the beginning of lunch, he was in his best form, interesting and witty; but he became more and more silent as the meal progressed. I believed at first that something had offended him. I had never before seen him with that brooding, sulky air. He did not look the same man. And then I noticed that he was drinking rather too often, and I began to wonder.

My suspicions were soon confirmed by casual reports that came to me from various quarters. 'Pity

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about young Edgar,' an English journalist remarked to me one day.

'Why? What about him?' I asked.

He drew down the corners of his mouth, and then tilted his elbow. 'Absinthe, I'm afraid,' he said. 'Ghastly stuff. Best thing for him is to go straight back to New York.'

'But are you sure?' I persisted; for despite my dawning fears, I had never suspected that it was as bad as that.

'Absolutely,' was the reply. 'It gets him queerly, too. Makes him cantankerous and moody. No one, I believe, has ever seen him incapable, but there's no doubt about it.'

And after that other acquaintances brought the same report. It was characteristic that everyone genuinely regretted Wallace's new habit; but no one seemed to have tried to stop him. He was a very difficult youngster to interfere with.

But, of course, I made the attempt.

He had avoided me since that luncheon-party, and managed to excuse himself from accepting the one or two casual invitations I now offered him. He was afraid of me; I was, perhaps, the only man in Paris of whom he was afraid; and my last note to him was less an invitation than a command.

He came—to déjeuner at half-past twelve—and he was sulky when he arrived. I gave him nothing but lemon-squash to drink with his lunch, and said nothing to him until I had him all alone in my library afterwards, smoking a cigar.

And then he denied it, flatly, resolutely, without heat. I told him that I knew he was lying; that I had

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seen him drinking at my own table; that certain friends had told me; that I knew the horrid truth from his face and manner as he sat there before me.

He looked me full in the eyes, boldly, defiantly. 'It's true I'm no longer on the water-wagon,' he said with a touch of insolence. 'One can't afford to go dry in this country. But that's all. I can look after myself.'

I ignored that. I saw that this was to be a contest of the Spirit between us; a struggle of wills. If I could conquer him; make him confess his fault; I might be able to control him.

'You are ruining yourself, mind and body,' I said. 'In six months you'll be a worthless wreck, fit only for a hospital or a maison de santé. There is but one thing to do; go home at once. Now, while there is time. You've made yourself a reputation; go back while you can still enjoy the fruits of it; marry that girl in New Jersey—and succeed.'

I was watching him keenly as I spoke, and as I concluded I saw just one flicker of uncertainty in his face. But when he spoke his voice was as hard, as determined as ever.

'You're making one great mistake,' he said. 'You mean well and I can forgive you for that, but this sort of fool's talk bores me. I tell you there's nothing in it, and that's finished. Now if you will excuse me I've got another appointment.'

I tried to hold him, but he was too strong for me. When he went out, I doubted if I should ever see him again. I knew that it must have cost him a great effort to be rude to me, and that in doing it he had deliberately intended to close our friendship. Having

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broken with me he was free—free to become a slave.

That interview of ours took place soon after Christmas, and when I went to his hotel next day, I was told that he had gone to the Riviera for three or four months. They had his address for the forwarding of letters, and I wrote to him several times, but I never had, or ever expected to have, any reply. I still hoped, although he had so decisively won that first battle of wills between us. But it was impossible for me to leave Paris just then, and I was compelled to wait. I had no doubt that he would return, sooner or later. In Nice or Cannes, he would be an individual, conspicuous; only in Paris would he be able to hide himself; and I guessed that he would soon be reaching a stage in his fall when he would seek most desperately to hide himself.

It was towards the end of April that I first had news of him. He had been seen one night by a man known to us both, in one of the *Buvettes* near the Gare du Nord; but when spoken to, had rudely denied his own identity.

After that I matched my wits against his. Would he go there again or not? I thought he might, arguing perhaps that I should never be so foolish as to seek him in the place where he had been recognised, or if I did go it would be as soon as I heard the news and only to make an enquiry of the *patron*. The next night therefore I went to the *buvette* without any attempt at concealment, and the clumsy story he had left behind him, instantly confirmed my guess.

‘Ah! you seek the young American,’ the *patron* said when I spoke to him. ‘But what a misfortune. Only this afternoon he has said good-bye to me, since he

goes to live on the other side of Paris. He has not told me precisely in what quarter.'

I had no doubt that the *patron* was himself deceived, but I was sure now that I should find Wallace in a few days time. And I was right. I returned to the *buvette*, five nights later, and he was there.

He did not move when he caught sight of me, but I saw him set his jaw as if he braced himself to some course of action that should put an end to my persecution of him. I sat down by him at the little round marble-topped table, and laid my hand on his arm.

'My lad,' I said, 'your wits are failing you. You'd have been a lot cleverer than that in the old days.'

To my eyes he had greatly altered, but a stranger would have seen little difference in him. His magnificent physical health had not yet begun to fail him, but his intelligence had. His eyes were less steady, and all the light had gone out of them. They were the dull eyes of a man who cannot think consecutively.

'Just as well,' he said. 'Now, we'll get this thing straight; and you can take it from me, here and now, that I'm through with all your cant.' He paused uncertainly there, as if he could not keep his attention on one point for more than a few moments at a time, and continued with a change of voice, speaking as if he were not fully aware of my presence. 'All poppycock that—about *knowing*. He knows one thing and I darned well know another. Sure, I know it.'

'Know what?' I put in quietly.

He seemed to come back to a full realisation of my present purpose with a start of surprise. 'Why, that you can get to hell out of here, as soon as it suits you,' he said.

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'You believe in hell, then?' I asked.

'Sure thing,' he murmured. 'I'm there, now.' And then he suddenly leaped to his feet, overturning the table, and was gone before I could stop him.

I gave up hope after that. I could no longer speak to him; he was beyond my reach. The only chance I thought was that he should have some accident that would keep him temporarily in hospital. And having some little influence in official quarters, I asked for and received a promise that I should be sent for if he were ever arrested; taken to a hospital; or—my heart sank as I anticipated that last terrible alternative—to the *Morgue*. . . .

It was some six or seven weeks after I had seen Wallace at the *buvette* that I was wakened between three and four o'clock in the morning by a continuous ringing at the outer door of my flat. My first thought as I reached for my dressing-gown was that the summons either to the police-station or to the hospital had come at last. When I opened the door and saw Wallace himself outside, I was for a moment utterly dumfounded.

'May I come in, a minute?' he said, before I had time to recover myself, and without waiting for my reply walked past me into the salon.

When I joined him there, he had turned on the light and was pacing up and down the length of the room, and he neither paused in his walk nor turned his head when I came in. I sat down and waited, without speaking. I had no intuition of what had brought him to me, and I was afraid of scaring him even by any show of affection. Watching him, more or less covertly, I noted that although his eyes still

wandered with an uneasy flicker of attention, they were less dull—they were as the eyes of a man just awakening from a profound sleep. And then, at last, he began to talk; at first unevenly, with pauses and hesitations; afterwards more fluently and with some recovery of his old style. And all the time he continued to pace rapidly back and forth, the length of my room—seven paces from wall to wall.

The muffled thud of that impatient tread still sounds in my ears. The soles of his feet were bare to the carpet under the pretence of the shoes he was wearing. It was the anxious yet mechanical pacing of the wild thing newly imprisoned; and as I hear it again in imagination, I recover all the emotion with which I listened to his tragic-comic story; though, indeed, I still pray that he may never know anything of its comedy.

'I never looked for proof—any kind of proof,' he began. 'Who does? You find your proof and it proves nothing. Except to yourself. It isn't a question of proof. It's knowing that turns the trick. That's why I've come to you. You've always pretended to know. Now can you explain? It isn't as if . . .

'See here! I've been walking for hours. Hours. No counting them. I don't know when I began. It gets me that way sometimes. I'll walk myself sober so as to drink again. I was ready to start again, when I got there to-night. Where? I don't know. Somewhere the other side of the river. I remember gardens. The Luxembourg, perhaps. Big trees, and the black shadow of great leaves under the arc lamps; like a pattern on the floor of hell; shadows that move as if

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they might shift and let you through. I daredn't walk in them. I was all alone; nobody to pull me up if I'd begun to sink. . . .

'Hallucination. Yes, that was hallucination. I've had worse. But not the other. I was quiet, I tell you. Quiet. Ready to drink again. That was why I went in. I saw the name over the door. The Café de la Paix. I stopped and looked at it. Peace for me, too; I said. That was what I'd come to find.

'Peace? You'd have thought so. Not a soul in the place when I looked in, but the *patron* and an old waiter. I'm telling you this so you'll know how clear my head was. I could see everything—easily. I can't always, but I could then. It was just the place I wanted. Quiet as death. Nothing moved when I looked in. The *patron* was at his desk, counting a lot of dirty notes, and sticking the worst ones together with gum paper. The waiter was reading his journal in the corner and there was a black and white cat asleep on a chair by the window. I could see them all, quite clearly and steadily. And none of them moved as I stood in the doorway. Never looked up, any of them, never batted an eyelid. It was queer, but I liked it. I wanted to be let alone; to get my drink and be let alone. I told you I'd come there for peace.

'I went across to the far end. There was a mirror there against the wall. Only one. Generally these places have a lot; but there was only one there. Not a very big one, either; but clear. I was surprised how clear that mirror was. I stood looking at it. I could see the patron at his desk, and the waiter with his paper, and the cat on the chair, as clearly as the things themselves. It didn't strike me for a moment that

there was something queer about them in the mirror, something wrong. Then I saw that the *patron* and the waiter were keeping deadly quiet; not stirring a finger, and I thought that was what was queer. But there was something queerer than that. . . .

He stopped speaking for a moment and put up his hand to his head, and I saw that the sweat was running off his forehead and dripping from his eyebrows. 'A darned lot stranger than that,' he continued. 'I wouldn't ask anyone but you to believe me, but it's God's solemn truth. There was no hallucination. It was just this: I could see everything else in that mirror, clearly and easily; but there was no reflection of me in it. None at all. Not a sign of it. I went cold as if someone had poured ice-water over me. I wondered when I had died. I guessed for certain I must somehow be dead. I stood there I don't know how long, and nothing moved; and neither the *patron* nor the waiter looked up when I went out. It was a sure thing they hadn't ever seen me. . . .'

He paused in his walk for the first time then, and looked at me. I had been dreading that moment. I had not yet decided what I ought to say. But I had my hand over my mouth, and my eyes must have been steady; for he seemed satisfied.

'I daren't go anywhere else for my drink after that,' he went on, 'and then I began to think of what I'd heard you say once; how when a drunkard dies he still goes on longing for the drink and can't get any satisfaction. I reckoned that was true all right, just then. I got the feeling that I'd go on longing for a good while; but all I could do was keep walking. After a bit I found myself on the Pont Neuf, and then a

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gendarme I know wished me good-night. I felt like hugging him, I was so glad to know I wasn't dead. I stopped and talked to him a while to make sure, and then I found out another thing which was that the moment I stopped walking I began to want a drink worse than ever. And the first notion that had come into my mind when I found I wasn't dead, was that I'd never touch another drop of liquor again, so long as I lived. I've got that notion still, but I daren't stop walking.'

I jumped to my feet, took him by the arm and we walked together; more slowly. I could feel as we fell into an easier pace that already he was nearly dropping with fatigue; and my immediate object, then, was to soothe his mind; bring him to the point at which his immense physical fatigue could find relief in natural sleep. But to do that I had to deceive him. I felt within me the certain knowledge that if I told him the truth, its grotesque futility would make him feel as if he had been tricked. If this miracle—for I still counted it a miracle—were to serve its proper purpose, I must appeal to his egotism, give him back his pride.

'My lad,' I said; 'you need have no fear. What you've told me, shows me very clearly that you've been chosen for some fine purpose. These long months of hell that you've endured were perhaps necessary for you. If my own faith had not been so weak, I might perhaps have known that you were never in real danger.'

'Does that mean,' he asked me—and as he spoke I felt that something of relief was coming to him, bringing with it a sense of his great physical fatigue, so that he began to stagger and lean heavily upon me, as

we still slowly paced the room—‘that you can in some way explain what I’ve been telling you?’

‘In some way,’ I said. ‘Because I believe in miracles and know that the possibilities of the spirit working through the body are infinite and altogether beyond our comprehension. Let me give you some instances within my own experience.’

I drew him down on to a broad comfortable couch, and without giving him time to think, began to tell him of some of the strange things I had known; of those interferences with what we regard as the natural law of cause and effect.

For a few minutes he listened to me, and I could not say at what point in my narrative he slipped into the depths of a profound unconsciousness. I was not afraid of disturbing him as I lifted his legs on to the couch, stripped off that poor pretence of shoes he was wearing, and settled him comfortably. I knew that much still remained to be done for him; but within me I felt a great certainty that he was saved.

And as I sat there watching him through the night, my thought went back to one Felix Bonnard, now so successful a painter, but who, five years ago, was so poor that he had not a tenth part of the money that would have been necessary to replace the mirror he broke in the little Café de la Paix; the single mirror that was the pride and joy of the *patron*. He was a good fellow, Bonnard, and it was sheer kindness of heart that urged him to say that if he could not afford to buy another mirror, he would paint one. And that was what he did. He was a great draughtsman, and night after night he spent there, painting on a great canvas the reflection that he saw in the cracked glass.

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If you go there in the daytime, the fraud is obvious after the first start of surprise, but at night even the soberest of visitors may be deceived to the point of having to touch the canvas.

Well, all the world says that it is bad luck to break a looking-glass, but in that case the superstition seems to have worked the other way. Certainly it brought no bad luck to the *patron*; for five years ago that sham mirror attracted a crowd to his café; and even now a few still go to see it. That was why, no doubt, neither the *patron* nor the waiter had moved as Wallace went out. They were used to casual Americans who strolled in, took a look at the famous curiosity and strolled out again. But it must have been nearly closing time; and the *patron*, I hear, is rich now.

Nor did it bring bad luck to Felix Bonnard, for it was through that painting he got employment as a scene-painter; and since then he, too, has become rich.

And now it had brought the greatest piece of luck he had ever known to Wallace Edgar. But no. I cannot believe that it was luck. I claim this as another case of those interferences with natural law we speak of as miracles. He was led.

But at the last a whimsical thought came to me. It was the devil's own luck that had been bad. By the breaking of that mirror he had lost the soul of Wallace Edgar.

COMMON HUMANITY



I

POLICE-CONSTABLE ROBINSON naturally assumed that the man was drunk. Robinson had had five years' experience of the abyss, and when he found a disreputable specimen of humanity such as this, crumpled into the corner of an alley, he wasted no time in guessing what might be the matter. That primary hypothesis of his proved to be the true one in nine cases out of ten.

'Now then,' he said gruffly in his usual formula, stirring the limp heap with the toe of his regulation boot. 'Can't stop here, y'know.' Within the limits permitted him by his experience of the abyss, he was a humane man and willing to let a 'drunk' move on, if he were able to walk.

When it was stirred, the heap made a sound faintly resembling spoken language.

'Eh! What's that?' Robinson asked sharply, searching the rubbish with the beam of his bull's-eye for signs of a head.

The thing spoke again.

Robinson took the words to be some kind of a name. Lacey More? Something like that. The surname pronounced funnily. Some kind of a foreigner very likely. There were no end of 'em about.

'All very well, Mr. Lacey More,' he said; 'but you can't stop 'ere, y'know. Come! You got to move on!'

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This time the heap made no reply, and Robinson leaned down to make the single test by which he confirmed his working hypothesis. He straightened himself sharply, took a quick step backward and blew out a long disgusted breath. ' 'Struth!' he ejaculated. 'He must be fair rotten.'

For a moment he stood there, dimly puzzled, regarding the heap in the light of the now enlarged circle of his lantern. Might have been a fine figure of a man once. There was a good breadth to those bony shoulders, and he might be tall if you straightened him out. Too heavy, even now, for one man to lift, probably; skeleton though he was.

Robinson walked deliberately to the end of the alley and blew a thin, shrill blast on his whistle.

At that incantation, the black shadows of the dingy street began stealthily to crawl with life. Out of the darkness a figure here and there cautiously emerged; a grotesque bunch of clothes that might be a little old woman, a half-naked strip of inquisitive boyhood, an unrecognisable something like a distorted baboon with a thin grey beard. Presently there were nearly a dozen specimens of common humanity, the dregs and scum of the abyss that never sleeps through the night, collected in a wide ring, curiously regarding the solid, respectable rock of Police-Constable Robinson, who stood massive and indifferent, violating the dank stillness of the night with the occasional scream of his whistle.

Save for a barely noticeable background of coarse breathing, or the punctuation of a raucous cough, no other sound disturbed the fetid, pregnant silence till it was broken first by an answering whistle and then by the firm tread of approaching feet.

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'Don't fancy 'e's drunk,' Robinson confided to his colleague as they straightened the reluctant, angular heap into the semblance of a man. 'Ill. Rotten! That's what 'e is. Strewth, you smell his breath.'

'Orspital?' returned his colleague, laconically; and as St. Phillip's Hospital was nearer than the police-station, they took him there, supporting him between them.

A poor show for the small inquisitive group that followed them. Nothing more than would be happening in the course of nature to themselves before long. But they followed. It was something to do.

The raised heap staggered between his burly guards. His head drooped. Once or twice he breathed with a sharp gasp, and muttered those two words that Robinson had mistaken for a name.

Behind them the little crowd gaped and whispered.

II

Manning, House-Surgeon of St. Phillip's, was a slender, clean-shaven man with an ascetic face. He showed signs of distress while Sir George Stubbs was speaking, clasped his hands and threw up his chin with a little jerk that was known to the students as his method of concealing a wince.

Sir George was short and thick-set, with a square pudgy face, slightly protuberant eyes and a strictly rectangular forehead.

Between them on the slab, clean now and stark naked, lay the material they were discussing—poor material from every point of view, but valuable for Stubbs, since it still lived.

Already he had pinched, punched and probed it,

exploring the internal depths of it with bougies, until satisfied with the accuracy of his diagnosis.

A malignant growth pressing on the mouth of the œsophagus, he had decided, and Manning had agreed; where they differed was in the treatment. Stubbs wanted to try an experiment, to open the body and essay a complicated operation.

‘But he couldn’t possibly live through it,’ Manning objected.

‘Well, he’ll be dead within ten days in any case,’ Stubbs agreed. ‘But we might keep him alive long enough to judge whether the experiment would have any chance of success with a healthy subject. His heart’s still good enough, and we’ll pump nourishment into him and keep him going for a week or so. I’ve been wanting a bit of decent material that one could take liberties with, to have a shot at this idea. This is a lucky chance. What’s your objection, Manning?’

Manning jerked his chin. ‘Oh!—Oh! Just common humanity,’ he said.

Stubbs watched him with an amused grin. ‘Well, that’s what I’m thinking of,’ he returned with a chuckle. ‘Here’s a fellow, good for nothing, spent, used-up, dying. His life’s done and a mighty poor mess he has made of it by the look of him. Well, I propose to use him for the good of humanity, eh? Of common humanity! Make him the subject of an experiment that may one day save a life that is worth saving.’

‘With no possible hope of success—in the present instance?’ Manning put in.

Stubbs waved that aside. ‘What does that matter?’

he said. 'Good God, Manning, wouldn't that, after all, be the real tragedy, the real offence against humanity if you like; to keep that worthless thing alive for another year or two. What good would it do to him or to anybody? 'Though,' he chuckled again and his pudgy face had the humorous effect of a music-hall artist preparing his supreme joke; 'though by Jupiter, I'll do my best; I'll do my very best.'

Manning made no reply. He was standing with bent head, vaguely speculating about the past life of Stubbs's material.

'Well, then, to-morrow at ten-thirty,' the great surgeon continued. 'And we'll have all the students in. It'll be a fine demonstration for them. Meanwhile pump all the blood you can into him!'

He was turning away when another thought occurred to him.

'By the way,' he said. 'No idea, I suppose, who he is or where he comes from?'

'None whatever,' Manning replied. 'He has spoken only two words, since he was brought in, and they were French.'

Stubbs grunted an interrogation.

'Laissez-moi,' Manning said.

'Meaning?' Stubbs asked.

'Oh! Leave me! Leave me alone to die quietly, I suppose,' Manning answered. 'That's all he wants, now.'

Stubbs tried his joke again. 'Yes, it'd be a mighty cruel thing to save his life,' he said; 'but we'll do our best, Manning. We'll do our best to keep him alive as long as we can—for the good of humanity.'

THE MEETING PLACE

III

All the pain had gone at last. The old pain had been gone for more than a week; but the new pain had been nearly as bad. Now, he was free again, to lie still and dream.

Queer dreams they would have seemed to those about him; to the stiff grey-haired sister who looked as though she sent herself to the wash every night and was returned newly-starched and ironed every morning; to the harried nurses, equally clean but more supple; to the case of dropsy in the next bed, so proud of the vast quantity of water they had taken from him when he was last tapped; to the lousy old drunkard with the broken leg on the other side; perhaps strangest of all, to the squat, determined little man, who had looked up at the lank house-surgeon a few minutes before and had said, 'By God, Manning, you know; there's many a true word spoken in jest'; and had then gone away chuckling as if he had said or done something immensely amusing.

They were not dreams in the ordinary sense of the word, those memories of his that came surging up unbidden, enchanted with all the magic of life; but the very vividness of the pictures gave them a quality that made them unreal, fantastic, dreamlike, seen against the background of this aridly clean ward with its reek of disinfectants.

The blank ceiling that curved almost imperceptibly into the blank wall, rose and arched itself into a dome gorgeous with a scheme of colouring derived from the East; colonnades of decorated pillars supporting arcades that looped just perceptibly more than a semi-

circle, sprang up and widened along the free aisle between the beds; the scrubbed and glistening wood blocks of the floor gave place to an intricate pattern of rich tiles. . . .

He heard the booming of an organ, that was presently reinforced by the overtones of wind instruments in brass and wood, the shout of trumpets and the piping melody of oboes. He saw mitred priests, in embroidered copes and flowing dalmatics, moving about the brilliant phantasmagoria of the lighted altar under the spread of the glittering baldachino. He saw the body of the cathedral alight with the fire of uniforms in blue and white and silver, and the occasional flash of steel; saw the pale mass of expectant faces, great bearded men and lovely women, resplendent and jewelled, princesses, grand duchesses, all the highest representatives of aristocracy and riches in that splendid Country, and all come to do honour to a young man dressed in the blue, white and silver of his regiment, broad-shouldered, dignified and proud; serenely indifferent to the admiration that had always been his right from the moment of his anxiously expected birth; but condescending almost tenderly to that figure beside him, shrouded in tulle, and in lace that would itself have been fit dowry for a bride of lesser degree than one who was so nearly connected with the throne.

The Emperor and Empress were waiting to receive the homage of that favoured bride and bridegroom . . .

'Sollum trewth, it is; though it's 'ard to believe; hait quarts they drawed off of me . . .'

The case of dropsy in the next bed had had a visitor. But there was no visitor for Stubbs's material.

Momentarily he realised again the arid cleanliness of

his surroundings and then the ward distended itself into the width of a magnificently wide street that ran straight and imposing between splendid houses, into some unseen distance. The road was covered with snow that sparkled in the sunshine, and bright sleighs drawn by two or three horses, galloped gaily by with a vivid clash of bells; the occupants snugly wrapped in furs of sable and ermine and Arctic-fox; the drivers in astrachan and bearskin.

There, too, was the man with the broad shoulders; older now and with a new touch added to the arrogance of his bearing. He was riding at an easy canter, a magnificent chestnut of sixteen hands, so obviously English by breed that the decorated saddle and accoutrements had a motley air of disguise. And as he rode, he gave a mock-military salute to a passing sleigh with a lacquey beside the driver, containing three children, two boys and a girl, who rose up and cried out to him as they went by, almost concealing the figure of their mother, who drew the eldest down beside her in order to wave a little fur-gauntletted hand to the handsome rider.

And again he saw the same figure on horseback, pacing deliberately along the quay of a great frost-bound river; glancing keenly right and left as he rode; scrutinising intently a couple of shabbily overcoated young men, in high clumsy boots, who glanced up at him with a passing touch of resentment and hatred, before they lowered their heads and trudged away. And the face of the rider as he pulled up his horse and sat magnificently still and upright, watching the retreating students, was suddenly hard and cruel. The struggle was still far-off, but now and again the huge

beast bared its fangs behind the bars of its massive cage. There was but one thing to be done, increase still further the strength of the bars, and torture the brute into submission.

That was an important part of the work of the splendid equestrian figure, so still and yet so arrogantly powerful, posed there by the frozen Neva. And more particularly now with the young heir come to the throne, vacillating and timid . . . the middle-aged man on the horse had no patience with weak men. He, himself, had never known fear; and thank God his own sons . . .

'Blarst yer, get aw'y. Get aw'y, I tell yer! Crawlين', crawlين', creepin' and crawlين' . . .'

The drunkard with the broken leg, who had been brought in only the day before, was on the verge of delirium. . . .

Fear? No, he had never known fear in those days. He could see again, and feel with all its original emotions, that private interview in the Palace. It was not the first time by many, that he had been thus honoured. The timorous, uneasy little man with the naval beard, seemed to find support and something of comfort in the careless strength of his general. It was to him that more than one hesitating suggestion had been offered in the seclusion of these private interviews; and now with Central Europe preparing to batter at the immense gates of his vast Empire, the supreme head of its Church and State, the little father who was second only to the Great Father in Heaven, was stammering doubts of the inclinations of his wife and their household. The Empress, naturally, was greatly averse from taking the initiative against her native country,

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with whose arts and culture she had always had so much sympathy.

And he, the strong, proud man, had given of his courage and his pride. It might be that he had been almost a determining influence during those hot July days, though his name was little known in Europe, and would not figure in history. He had never figured prominently in the political and military life of his country. Why should he seek further honours? He had never been ambitious in that sense. What could life offer him, better than that he already possessed? He had been born great, powerful and honoured; and his sons would succeed to a name and to positions certainly not less worthy and magnificent than those of their father. No, the world had had no prize to offer that could tempt his pride. . . .

‘You know, Manning,’ Stubbs said, rubbing his squat hands together. ‘I believe, by a miracle, almost by a miracle, we’ve brought it off. What a calamity, eh, my boy? What a tragedy to have saved the life of this muck, just to give him another chance of rotting more slowly in some filthy slum. You know we ought—just a few of us, the few whose judgment could be trusted in these matters—we ought to be given an authority to clear out offal of this kind when we have the chance. You talk about “common humanity”, but the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number demands a lethal chamber in some cases. Better for everyone concerned, eh?’

‘This fellow, you know; why, in six weeks’ time he’ll be back where he was when they brought him in. Been like that all his life, as likely as not. Slum-born and bred . . .’

COMMON HUMANITY

'I don't believe it,' Manning interrupted.

Stubbs gave an amused grin and looked down at his material.

'He *has* got something of an air about him,' he remarked. 'But God bless you, Manning, that's one of the tricks of these professional beggars. He'll spin you no end of a yarn, no doubt, when he gets a bit stronger. Lord, man, only the other day a feller of this kind tried to get me with a yarn of having been a big bug in the Russian army. Polish Jew, he was, I should say, by the look of him. And by the way, there's a touch of the same strain about this old chap, if I'm not mistaken. You haven't identified him yet, by the way? No. Can't the police help you? What do you call him?'

Manning jerked up his chin. 'Police-Constable Robinson's name has stuck to him somehow,' he said. 'We call him Lacey More.'

THE ARTIFICIAL MOLE



WE had been discussing the X—— murder in which Hatton had been personally engaged, and I had just repeated the trite remark that the criminal always made some fatal oversight that led to his arrest.

‘Not always,’ Hatton said; and reminded me of the famous series of murders in the late ’eighties attributed to ‘Jack the Ripper’, who so far as we know, escaped scot-free.

‘But in those cases there was no motive in the ordinary sense,’ I protested. ‘I’ll grant you that it is possible, even easy, to commit a motiveless murder and get away unsuspected.’

‘Well, then,’ Hatton said; ‘what about . . .’ and he recalled three or four well-known crimes committed in the past ten years for which no criminal has ever been brought to justice.

‘Yes. One forgets those cases,’ I admitted.

‘Also,’ Hatton said; ‘there are murders now and again which don’t get reported at any length in the newspapers and that the general public knows next to nothing about.’ He paused and smiled reminiscently.

‘You’re thinking of one case in particular?’ I returned.

‘I am,’ he agreed and his smile gave place to a sigh before he continued, ‘You might write a novel about it. Good stuff for a novel it would be, because there was some mighty interesting psychology in it. Morbid

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psychology, perhaps; but based on a fundamental weakness in feminine human nature. Though that was only the beginning of it all. The weakness, the blindness you might say, only brought about the conditions in which the crime was possible. I've got my old notes here, and if you'll give me a couple of minutes to look them up, I'll tell you about it. I've got all the detail as clearly in my mind as ever it was, but I couldn't be quite sure of the dates without reference; and it was a case in which dates were important.

'It happened in the Spring of 1910,' he began when he had rapidly run through his notes. 'I was living with my mother in South London at that time, and the interested parties were known to me slightly; which was how I came to be implicated in the first instance. Two half-sisters they were, living together in furnished apartments. They had had different fathers and so different surnames. The elder one, Miss Hannah Grey, was a woman of thirty-five or so; a tall gaunt woman with a rough voice, and a remarkable identity mark in the shape of a big mole with a tuft of hair on it; as big as a sixpence it was, low down on her left cheek near the angle of the jaw. A terribly pious woman she was by all accounts, and a perfect dragon in looking after her little half-sister; a pretty, timid girl of twenty, who regarded Hannah as a mother, her own mother having died when she was a few months old.

'Well, it was this younger sister, Miss Rose Moore as she was then, who came to see me one Friday evening, the 8th of April to be exact, to ask my advice. "You're a detective, aren't you, Mr. Hatton?" she began and when I had told her that I *was* connected with the C.I.D., she asked me if I could advise her

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unofficially. I said I could so long as she did not ask me to conceal any crime, and then she came out with her story.

‘According to her, Miss Hannah Grey had disappeared. She had gone down to Westbourne, the previous 12th of March on the plea of ill-health, a colourable excuse as she had certainly been in a very nervous state before she went; hysterical now and again, and more than once her sister had heard her praying aloud in her own room in the small hours of the morning. She had gone very suddenly at the end, too, and had left no address but *Poste Restante*, Westbourne.

‘Miss Moore was naturally rather anxious about her, but her uneasiness had been considerably lessened by the letters she had received. She had had four in all, none of them dated except by the day of the week, and none of them giving any address. In the first, received on the 15th of March, the Tuesday after Miss Grey went away, she had made the excuse that the boarding-house she was in didn’t suit her and that she might be leaving any day. In the other letters she made no further reference to where she was staying, and gave hardly any account of her doings. They were, in fact, peculiarly empty, uninteresting letters, apparently hurriedly written, but with no suggestion in them of unhappiness or distress of any kind. She said that her health had greatly improved and so far as one could judge she appeared to be unusually cheerful for her.

‘But after the last letter dated “Sunday” and received ten days before, on the 29th of March, Miss Grey had ceased to write. Miss Moore on her side had written several times since then to Westbourne, begging for

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news but had had no reply. My first enquiry was as to whether Miss Grey had any tendencies to depression of mind, such as might have tempted her to suicide; but her sister shook her head at that. "Have you any theory, yourself?" I asked, but she said she had not; and though I fancied that she had something in reserve, I did not press her just then, but turned my attention to the envelopes of Miss Grey's letters.

'Three of them were straightforward, and useless, enough; having the postmark, Westbourne, and the date, reasonably clear; but the postmark of the last letter was almost undecipherable. I could make out what looked like a U R near the end of the word and what might have been a part of an E three or four letters earlier which seemed to suggest that it, also, came from the same town; but a comparison with the other postmarks showed at once that the last one had been made with a different stamp, while the spacing of the letters implied, a shorter name. After that a closer examination under a magnifying glass gave me an F in place of an E for what was probably the first letter; and the possibility that the only other decipherable letters might be O R; an inference that was practically confirmed when I found that there was a little station called Fulford on the branch line that joins up Westbourne with St. Edmund's.

'Miss Moore had never heard of Fulford, was quite sure that her sister had not mentioned such a place at any time before going away; but the obvious line to take was first to make a call at the Westbourne General Post Office to see if Miss Moore's recent letters had been called for and then to make an enquiry or two at Fulford, evidently nothing more than a village in which

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a stranger such as Miss Grey would certainly be noticed. In fact, to cut short this part of the story, I promised Miss Moore to go down to Westbourne the next afternoon, a Saturday, and see if I could find out anything for her, unofficially.

‘My own idea, at that time, was that Hannah Grey had committed suicide; despite her sister’s disbelief in that theory. I was nearly twenty years younger then, and a little too cocksure in my judgments of men and women; apt to divide them all up into types and docket them without too close an examination. I had not had a great deal of experience, you see, and what I had had was almost entirely confined to the ordinary criminal class.

‘And my first call at the Westbourne Post Office, gave me no reason to alter my mind. Miss Moore’s letters had been called for until Saturday the 26th of March. The post office clerk remembered Miss Grey as soon as I described the mole on her cheek, and was able, as it happened, to fix the date on which she had last seen her; that date being the day before she had written the last letter to her sister. The later letters from Miss Moore, five in all, had never been called for.

‘Well, the way I worked it out in the little branch line train going to Fulford was that Hannah Grey had been suffering from some kind of delusion, but had been sane enough to wish to spare her beloved half-sister the pain of knowing that she proposed to commit suicide, and had carefully laid her plans accordingly. Perhaps I was not so far out in the matter of the delusion, but as I was soon to learn it had been of a very different kind.

‘Fulford is just a small village of 500 or so inhabi-

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tants, a mile from the station and half a mile from the sea. A bleak, desolate place, set down in the marshes. A perfect beast of a little place, I thought it that afternoon, for there was a bitter east wind blowing; and not so much as a hedge anywhere to shelter you. I've called it a station, by the way, but it was only a "halt" in those days, just one platform and a shed—it was a single line—and the guard of the train took and distributed the tickets.

'Nevertheless, Fulford, from my point of view, had certain advantages to recommend it, the chief of them being that there was but one centre of information in the village, a general shop that was even more promiscuous than the average shop of that kind, since it was post office, grocer's, haberdasher's, stationer's, baker's and everything else you can think of all in one. And the woman and her husband who kept it with the help of their son Joe, a boy of fifteen who went the rounds in a cart, were reasonably intelligent people and fairly sharp observers, though like most of the witnesses I've come across in that walk of life they chiefly noticed the things that were of little use to me in my work.

'However, they knew quite a lot about the lady I was looking for. She had drawn attention to herself from the start by coming down there at all at that time of year. But she had not stayed in the village. Some enterprising town-planner of that period had had the idea of making his fortune by building half-a-dozen small houses close down to the sea; "Bungalow Town" he had christened it; and my friends at the shop—Robinson their name was—were his house-agents.

'Nothing in that so far, perhaps, and all helping to

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bear out my theory, but I got the surprise of my life when I learnt at the very beginning of my conversation that she had come down there and had lived in one of those houses by the sea with a man. I could hardly believe it when they first told me. I had seen Hannah Grey two or three times, and knew her reputation for pious respectability; and if I had been asked who was the least likely woman I had ever known to set off on a prank of that kind, her name would have been the first to occur to me. I knew she had a bit of money of her own; and I guessed right away what the man's game had been. What beat me was how he could ever have persuaded her to go away with him. She was not a fool by any means.

'But that piece of information put another face on the business altogether; and I dropped the casual enquiry line I had begun with, showed the Robinsons my badge and gave them to understand that I wanted their evidence officially. They pulled themselves together pretty quickly when they found out that I came from Scotland Yard, but I remember that their first reaction to that was to tell me that Mr. and Mrs. Gunn, as they had called themselves, had paid all their bills before they went away. From first to last, the Robinsons hadn't, I believe, any suspicion that it might be anything worse than a charge of some form of swindling that I had against this so-called Mr. Henry Gunn.

'Now I'll boil down the story I got bit by bit from the Robinsons, just to give you the real essentials; and I may tell you that it was not quite the kind of story I was anticipating.

'The first part fitted well enough, however. Mr.

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Henry Gunn had evidently been cautious from the start. He had come down at the end of February and taken the house, "Bellevue"—that was how they had spelt it!—after a few very casual enquiries. Only one thing, he had insisted upon: was there central heating from a separate furnace, because he suffered greatly from the cold? And, as it happened, that one house, "Bellevue", had what he wanted; being the first that was built, and designed, it seemed, to be lived in all the year round.

'After that, Mr. Gunn was very easily satisfied; did not want to see how the place was furnished; but took it at once without even inspecting it, paid the rent in advance until the end of March and said that he would write to tell them what day and at what time to expect him and Mrs. Gunn, and to give them all the necessary orders with reference to provisions, particularly coke for the furnace. The Robinsons were not the least suspicious of him. They were too glad to get a good customer at that time of year. In appearance, Mrs. Robinson told me, he was a man of about middle height, with a heavy black moustache, and a white skin. She thought he was probably consumptive. But she, herself, saw him only that once; and the boy, Joe, who was my principal witness did not seem to have taken much notice of him. All he could do was to confirm his mother's description.

'So far, it all looked plain sailing with a nasty, unsavoury crime at the end of the course; but I was to be very considerably puzzled by what came after.

'The Gunns arrived at Fulford on the afternoon of the 12th of March, the day Hannah Grey had left London. They had a wagonette to meet them, had

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ordered everything in advance by letter, and drove straight to "Bellevue". For a fortnight they behaved as one might expect any middle-aged couple to behave in the circumstances except that Mr. Gunn never went out except to take a walk on the lonely beach. Mrs. Gunn, however, sometimes came up to the village and on three or four occasions went into Westbourne by train. They had all their provisions from the Robinsons' shop, and the boy, Joe, called every morning except Sunday for orders.

"Then on the 28th of March—we could fix the date without difficulty—Mr. Gunn was, according to his wife's statement—taken ill with influenza. Nothing serious, Mrs. Gunn told Joe—they never had, or even asked for, a doctor—but he would have to keep his bed for a few days. Now that date, you notice, was the day after that on which Hannah had written her last letter to her half-sister; and although Mr. Gunn's illness explained well enough why Hannah had not called at the Westbourne post office; there seemed no particular reason why she should not have written. Also, Joe said that he thought Mrs. Gunn was rather "queer" after her husband fell ill. Sometimes she called her orders from the bedroom window, sometimes pinned a piece of paper on the door. And all that time, he never once set foot in the house. Either he left the milk, bread and groceries in the yard, or Mrs. Gunn took them from him on the threshold of the back door.

"That puzzled me a little, but there was some still more bewildering information to come, for it seemed that Mrs. Gunn had left the place only the day before, the 8th of April, going by the evening train to West-

bourne, while Mr. Gunn had followed her that very morning, but had gone to town, if he had been going to town, the other way by St. Edmund's. Naturally the Robinsons had been a trifle surprised that Mrs. Gunn should go away leaving her husband all alone in the house after he had but just recovered from an attack of influenza; but she had seen no one but Joe who drove her to the station, had not been communicative and as she had had no luggage, it had been presumed that she would be returning the next day.

'Mr. Gunn's departure that morning had been rather more noticeable. He had been, the Robinsons inferred, not only in a very poor state of health but also considerably agitated. He had been fully dressed with his overcoat and hat on when Joe had called at the house with the milk and bread at eight o'clock, had spoken to him from the bedroom window, and both then and later when he drove to the station at eleven o'clock, had worn a heavy woollen muffler which he had kept over his mouth. I cross-examined the boy, Joe, fairly strictly about these facts, all of them so very fresh in his memory, but I got nothing more of any value, and if the details were a trifle suspicious in some ways, they were all perfectly consistent with what had gone before; the one surprising thing being that Mr. Gunn should have gone off alone. "We reckoned they must have had a quarrel of some kind", Mrs. Robinson said and I was inclined to agree with her.

'Well, I got the keys of the house from the Robinsons and went down alone to have a look at it. I did not expect to find anything that would help me and I didn't till just as I was leaving. The house was in two storeys—all the others, none of them occupied at that

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time, were bungalows—and somewhat lightly furnished in the style of a place meant to be let for the summer season. The furnace was in the coal cellar leading out of the kitchen, but I didn't examine anything very closely. There seemed to be no reason why I should. The place was all very clean and tidy as if before she had gone away Hannah had put everything straight for the next tenant, the one exception being the bedroom in which Mr. Gunn had presumably slept the night before. Even that was reasonably neat and I noticed that the wash-basin had not been used. Either he must have washed under the tap in the scullery downstairs or not at all.

'I was just leaving the bedroom when it came into my mind to test the radiator. The house seemed warm in comparison with the cold outer air and I guessed that the furnace had not gone out very long before. And by one of those extraordinary chances that do happen sometimes in real life, I ran my fingers along the top pipe of the radiator—it was an old-fashioned tubular affair—in just such a way as to feel something between the radiator and the wall. It tickled my fingers and I thought it was a spider; and as I have a peculiar objection to spiders, I got hold of it and hawked it out. But it was not a spider, although at first sight it looked just like one, but a very peculiar object that you will find to-day in the Criminal Museum at Scotland Yard, if you should have the curiosity to go and look for it—a round piece of black rubber about the size of a sixpence, with a tuft of hairs neatly threaded through it and fastened with spirit gum.

'Naturally, I kept that, but it wasn't until I was in the train going back to town that the explanation of the

whole affair came to me. I saw it all then in a flash. Mr. Gunn had been doubling the parts of himself and Hannah for nearly a fortnight, and the first and most important item of his disguise had been an artificial mole.

'The more I thought over it, the more convincingly did that theory seem to fit the facts. Going back over the Robinsons' evidence, it all came to me as clear as a pikestaff. His own temporary disappearance had been fully accounted for by his illness; which also gave a reason for his not having to appear disguised as Hannah except to the boy Joe; and then, except on the evening he left—when it was getting dark—only for very brief interviews. Then again he had had to keep his muffler up to his face that morning in order to conceal the fact that he had shaved off his moustache. Oh, yes! everything fitted in like the pieces of a puzzle. After that, nearly all that I had to do was to discover if it had been possible for him to have left Fulford at 6.30 on the previous evening and be back there in time to get away again, as himself, by the next morning? And it was. The time-table showed me that he could have left Westbourne by the 7.10 for London; have got out at 7.50 at the first stop, Catbridge Junction, and have taken the 8.5 from there to St. Edmund's, in time to catch the 9.15 on the branch line back to Fulford. Probably, I decided, he had got out at Northbeach, a station earlier and walked from there in the dark along the sands to "Bellevue". That itinerary presented no difficulties.

'Finally to clinch the theory, I saw only too clearly, the reason for his manœuvres. He had probably murdered the unfortunate Hannah somewhere about the 28th of March; and had spent the ensuing ten days in

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getting rid of the body. He had the furnace he had been so insistent upon, for the best part of the work, and the calcined bones had probably either been crushed and powdered or destroyed by acid. Oh, yes! It is not so difficult to get rid of all traces of a body, if you have time enough; and that was the factor, Mr. Henry Gunn had planned to make sure of.

'Well, I had never a doubt that I was right, nor had my chief to whom I told the whole story, as soon as I got back to town. Indeed, he congratulated me very warmly on what I had done; and I went home as proud as a peacock. I did not see Miss Moore that night, by the way. For one thing, I wanted to have my case complete first; and for another, I did not at all relish having to break the news to her.

'So far so good, eh? And when I went down on a still warm scent in a car the next day—a Sunday, you remember; I should never have been able to get through, if I had had to rely on the train service—I felt pretty hopeful of having Henry Gunn under observation in the course of twenty-four hours or so; though as my chief had pointed out, we might have a hard job to bring the crime home if the body had been absolutely destroyed.

'But that was where things began to go wrong. I could trace Mr. Gunn dressed as Miss Hannah Grey into the 7.10 train for town from Westbourne on Friday evening; and I got news of him in his own clothes leaving for the same destination from St. Edmund's on Saturday morning. But in both cases after he had once got into the train he seemed to have completely disappeared. Not a trace of him at Catbridge Junction or anywhere else along the line on

Friday evening; nor, again, on Saturday morning. And yet he must have been a noticeable figure on both occasions.

'Well, of course, we went through "Bellevue" pretty thoroughly; dug up the garden, took up the floors, sifted the ashes of the furnace. But we didn't find a scrap of evidence. The job had been too thoroughly and carefully done. In fact, the only other piece of corroborative evidence we picked up, was when we went into Miss Hannah Grey's business affairs and found out that in the course of February, she had sold all her securities, drawn her money from the bank and changed most of it into French notes at the *Crédit Lyonnais*—notes of a hundred francs each, that had not been in sequence and no record had been kept of the numbers. Must have been a nice haul for Mr. Gunn: over £5000 in all, I calculated.

'Well, there you are, eh?' Hatton said watching me with a grim smile. 'There's a case for you in which the criminal made no mistake unless you count the fact that he mislaid that artificial mole as one? Lord! how I used to go over that affair in my mind afterwards, trying to work out how he had been too clever for us.'

'And you never caught Mr. Henry Gunn?' I asked.

'Never,' Hatton said. But I knew by his smile that his story was not quite finished.

'Nor heard of him?' I inquired.

'Ah! I didn't say that,' he replied. 'As a matter of fact, we heard all about him—ten years later. And from whom do you think?'

I shook my head. I have no gift for the drawing of inferences of this kind.

'From Miss Hannah Grey!' Hatton said.

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I stared at him in complete bewilderment. 'Do you mean to say . . .' I began.

'That she'd never been murdered?' he supplied. 'I do mean just that, and the case has been a warning to me not to let myself be led away by fixing my mind on a theory while I'm investigating the facts. If I'd not been so sure of what had happened, I might . . . However, I'm not sorry in some ways that I made a mistake; especially as I married Miss Grey's half-sister, Miss Rose Moore. We've been married getting on for twenty years now.'

'Well, aren't you going to tell me about it?' I prompted him as he paused thoughtfully on his last statement.

'Yes, I'll tell you,' Hatton said, 'though this part of the story isn't in my line. You see, this is where the psychology, I spoke of, comes in; and I'm not sure if I can make you understand it. To begin with you must know that Miss Grey had a French grandmother, her father's mother; and spent a good part of her time until she was nearly twenty, in France. And what one would never have suspected her of, in middle-age, was what you might call the undeveloped passion in her blood. Rose had guessed it. She was not surprised when I told her that her sister had gone off with Mr. Gunn. "Oh! I was so afraid of that," she said; and when I asked her why, she told me that it was because Hannah "had always been so dreadfully down on that sort of thing". Queer reason, eh? But I fancy I can understand it. What people talk of nowadays as suppressions, Freud and that stuff. And in her case, it was all mixed up with religion which seems to have made it worse.

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‘Anyway when she did give in, she went the whole way, and then became extra pious afterwards to make up for it; turned Roman Catholic and went into a convent in Belgium. It was from there Rose heard from her. She thought she was dying when she wrote, the letter was forwarded from Rose’s old address; but she lived for another twelve months after that; and Rose saw her on three occasions in all; and had the whole story at one time or another.

‘Well, I can give you my side of it, but what beats me is to get the atmosphere to describe all the agonies that unfortunate woman went through. You could make a novel out of that, but it wouldn’t be very cheerful reading. You see, in the first place, she had always had her suspicions of Mr. Gunn, but he charmed her somehow; he seems to have had a gift with women; and in some ways she was as weak with him as a girl of eighteen. He was the only man who’d ever made love to her, and I suppose there was something in her French blood that couldn’t resist it.

‘But to get back to the crime, it seems that I must have been right about Gunn up to a point. He must have been pretty much the kind of scoundrel I had inferred and laid the kind of plans I had attributed to him up to the point of murdering Hannah, destroying the body in the furnace, and laying a false scent by getting away in her clothes. It would not have been too difficult. They were about the same height, her voice was easy to imitate and with that identity mark of hers which always caught the attention, he might quite easily have brought it off. Only one thing, probably, prevented him. Hannah Grey got in first.

‘It seems that in the course of that first fortnight at

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Fulford, her suspicion of him had been steadily growing, but what finally set her off was precisely the same queer piece of evidence that put me on the track—the artificial mole! She came into the bedroom quietly one day, and caught him sitting at the dressing-table trying the effect of it on his own cheek. And that, apart from her suspicion of him and her instant intuition of what his game was—she was no fool—seems to have got her on the raw. A kind of vanity, perhaps? She was mad to think that he should imitate her deformity. And Gunn obviously saw that the game was up and went for her out of hand. They struggled; and she was stronger than he was, she pushed him violently back against the wall, he struck the back of his head, and was either stunned or fainted—his heart, apparently was none too strong. And if she had tied him up and left him there to recover, she might have got away with no sin on her conscience other than that she believed herself to have already committed. But as she told Rose, “something stronger than she was took hold of her”; a tremendous reaction against him and herself and the whole affair, I suppose. Anyway, explain it how you like, she strangled him while he was still unconscious.

‘After that, came her atonement; the price she had to pay for all that she had done; and a pretty severe price it must have been. You see, she was no shrewd experienced criminal. She had no plans, and what with spending most of her time on her knees praying for forgiveness, she was in no state of mind to make any. For ten days, she lived in that house with the body of Mr. Gunn; but in between her bouts of penance, she had just sense enough to keep up appear-

ances; give her orders to Joe every morning and destroy the food he left for them. She says that she herself ate nothing all that time. It may be true. I'm told that a wonderful clearness of mind comes to people sometimes when they are starving; and that clearness presently came to her. *She* said, of course, that God guided her. I would not deny that, either.

'But her inspiration was mighty near coming too late. She had started to run away on that Friday—the evening before I went down to Fulford, the first time—and it wasn't until she was sitting in the train in Westbourne station, that—what shall I say?—the impulse came to her. Hannah, you understand, made out that it was a kind of miracle, the first step of her conversion to the Roman Catholic faith. She talked of voices, in the Joan of Arc style, of being wonderfully guided and told what she must do. She said that she knew then that she had been forgiven, and all that she had to do thereafter was to submit herself to the will of God. Your psychologist would say, I don't doubt, that all those notions were illusions consequent upon ten days' starvation; but to me, that only begs the question. Put it the other way round and it seems to me reasonable enough to suppose that in those states the senses may be in a condition to receive messages that usually can't reach us.

'However what is certain is that she was somehow strung up to a very remarkable feat of strength and endurance. She got out of the train on the side away from the platform—she was alone in the compartment—and made her way across the metals without being seen in the dusk, and walked back to "Bellevue" along the beach. It was two days after the new moon,

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there was an unusually low tide that night, and when she got back to the house, she stripped Gunn's body and somehow managed to drag it down to the sea, weighted it with a couple of big stones and drowned it soon after midnight, at the bottom of the ebb.

'All that time, she was in a religious ecstasy, you understand, which seems to have upheld her for two or three days. The notions of tidying up the house, packing her luggage and Gunn's and finally escaping in his clothes, were all, according to her, instructions given her by the "voices". And whatever way you look at it, the luck was all running her way about that time. She had a compartment to herself in the train from St. Edmund's, and changed back into her own clothes, which was why I got no news of Gunn on that line for I was so obsessed with the idea of looking for him that I never made a single inquiry for her.

'Well, after that the rest was easy. No passports were necessary for France or Belgium in those pre-war days; she spoke French and had plenty of French money with her. Even if I'd been looking for her instead of Gunn, I might have missed her. And she crossed by night, and managed to drop Gunn's luggage overboard in mid-channel without being seen. When she arrived in Belgium, she went straight to Louvain, because she had stayed there once in her youth and knew of a convent in the place. She had no difficulty in being accepted into the Roman Catholic Church, made her confession, of course, presented her 200,000 francs to the convent and became the most pious nun in the place. They would have made her Sister Superior after the German occupation, but she was too humble to accept such a position. She lived for

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eleven years after she went to Louvain, and I fancy she was reasonably happy, though all her life was one long penance—a part of which by the way was to hold no communication with anyone in England until she believed that she was dying; not that she was greatly tempted, I expect, except in the case of Rose.

‘Well, there you are, sir; that’s the story of the queerest case I ever had anything to do with; a mixture of psychology, what you may call the ordinary criminal cunning and, the most unusual factor, mysticism. Personally, I don’t blame myself for having been deceived. There were incidents in which it really seemed as if you could read the hand of God. That matter of the high tide, for example, which completely wiped out all traces of the dragging of Gunn’s body down the beach. To say nothing of the east wind I referred to, earlier, to do the same work with the loose sand above high-water mark. You may call it Fate, Luck, Coincidence, anything you like, but I sometimes wonder if they are not just different names for the same thing.’

THE CHAMPION



THE Half-Moon is not one of my usual resorts, but the man who had been sitting next to me at Thurston's during the afternoon session of the Amateur Billiard Championship, had told me that at the Half-Moon, one saw some of the most brilliant players in London. 'Better than either of these chaps, some of 'em,' he had said, indicating the pair in front of us. 'Why don't they enter for the championship then? That's easy, that is. Becos they can't afford it. Can't get off to play the 'eats. Lots of 'em, there are; near good enough for professionals.'

I do not believe everything of this sort that is told to me. I am well aware of that forgivable little human weakness that leads men into gross exaggeration in order to win the admiration we accord to one who possesses some piece of rare or marvellous information. But I am very fond of watching good billiards, and I went to the Half-Moon that evening to see if I could find there a possible future champion.

And it is true that my friend of the afternoon had not exaggerated too grossly. There were some very good players there—not perhaps up to championship form, but far above the average. And then for the second time that day, I drifted into conversation with a casual acquaintance.

He was not the type I admire. He was wearing a worn tweed suit, and a tweed cap with a big peak

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pulled down over his eyes. He sat with his legs stretched straight out in front of him, and kept his hands deep in his trouser pockets. But there was something about his eyes that interested me. They were rather closely set, but there was a look of intense concentration about them, a look of almost ferocious determination.

'Pretty good, these chaps,' I commented by way of opening the conversation.

He turned and gave me one keen glance from under the rim of his cap. 'Good! My Lord!' he ejaculated contemptuously. 'Not a notion, either of them.'

'Oh! Come!' I protested.

'Not a notion,' he repeated savagely, returning to his contemplation of the game. 'Oh! I don't mean as they can't pot a bit or judge an angle near enough. But that's only the beginning of billiards. What you got to learn at this game is to know just exactly where all three balls will be after you've played your stroke; ah! or after the stroke after that, or the one after that. Roberts used to pretend 'e could always see three strokes ahead. Very like he could. But suppose a fellow got so good as to be able to see ten strokes ahead; what?'

'It isn't possible,' I replied firmly.

'Ain't it? Ain't it?' he demanded fiercely. 'Then you can take it from me as it is. You won't believe me, I know. Can't expect you to; but I'll tell you all the same. There's a boy of fifteen playing in the Amateur Championship this year, ain't there? Youngest player what's ever gone in; and didn't do so bad considerin'? Well, he ain't the youngest what's ever entered. Near twenty years ago, there was a boy of fourteen put down

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to play. You can look it up for yourself, if you like. I suppose they keep some sort of a record. And that boy would have won the championship art-right, on 'is 'ead. No one, not Fry nor nobody, would 'ave 'ad a dog's chance against him.

'E'd been brought up to it in a manner of speakin'; played the game since he was five and 'ad to 'ave a stool to stand on to reach the table. But it wasn't only practice with him; 'e 'ad a nacheral gift. More'n that; genius it was, sheer genius. You could put the three balls pretty near anywhere you liked on the table and e'd put three chalk marks on the cloth and show you where they'd be after e'd played half-a-dozen strokes. *At fourteen*, that was! What would 'e 'ave been like at twenty, I arst you? Newman? Willie Smith? Pooh! they'd 'a been amatoors by the side of 'im.

'Did 'e die? No 'e didn't die, neither. What 'e did do was to go for a walk, a few days afore 'e 'ad to play 'is fust 'eat. Not much in that, you say; seein' as 'ow 'e used to go for a longish walk every day to keep 'imself in 'ealth. Only somethin' 'appened on that particular walk. 'E wasn't lookin' where 'e was goin'. 'E was playing billiards in 'is 'ead. It was a nabit 'e 'ad, 'e'd think out a break and then go 'ome an' play it. 'An 'e very near got run over; did get in a manner o' speakin', seeing as he fell down full length in the road, and a dray 'orse put his great 'oof right down on the boy's right 'and. Crushed it somethin' frightful. They 'ad to take it off at once.

'Ow do I know all that?'

My companion had suddenly turned his fierce eyes and as he spoke he drew his right hand from his trouser pocket and put it under my nose. Only it

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was not a hand, but a stump cut short at the wrist.

'That's 'ow I know,' he said. 'Reason enough, ain't it?' And without another word he got up and stalked out of the room.

For a few minutes, I remained deep in thought, and, I will admit it, deep also in wonder. And then I got up, crossed the room and went over to the marker.

'Do you know that chap who just went out?' I asked.

'Should do,' the marker returned. ''E's in 'ere every night a'most. Jimmy Brown 'is name is.'

'He told me a remarkable story,' I said.

' 'E would,' the marker replied with emphasis. 'Told you 'ow 'e lost 'is 'and perhaps? I thought so. 'Orse stepped on it, 'e told you? Ah! that's a new one that is. It's been the war mostly and 'ow he got done out of the Victoria Cross. 'E's a knock-out is Jimmy. A fair champion, I call 'im.'

THE CLEVER MR. FALL



DENNIS ASHWORTH began by saying that he told me this story as a 'warning'.

We were sitting on the Plage at Cannes one lovely morning at the end of January, and had just been saluted by two Russians of our acquaintance, who were not, as I remarked, the least like the Russians one inferred from Dostoievsky, Chekhov or Gorki.

'And what about some of our Russian Princesses, here?' Dennis replied. 'Those comfortable-looking little bodies who eat such remarkable meals? No, my boy, you can't always spot a Russian at sight, by reading Russian fiction. Nor, on the other hand. . . . But let me tell you a story, as a warning.'

He had been staying at Scatterwick Castle, the previous August, having gone up on the twelfth for the grouse-shooting. The hostess on that occasion had been Lady Maude Phelps, the eldest of the long brood of girls that had been sent by Providence to the late Lord and Lady Asprey, before they had at last produced the longed-for son. Christened Marcus according to precedent, he was at this time a quiet, self-contained, able young man of twenty-seven who had done everything that was expected of him except find a wife.

Lady Maude is one of those good-natured, fearfully energetic women, who when they have reached the fifties, go in tremendously for all kinds of active employment: charities, new religions, spiritualism, or

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even politics. And she had inevitably one or two side interests to further in running the party at Scatterwick that August, including among the more typical guests at such a gathering: Gregory Fall, the writer, who deserved a knighthood in Lady Maude's opinion, and whom she wanted to introduce to one or two influential people, a Mrs. Vincent, a widow of fifty or so, credited with remarkable psychic powers, and a Russian Princess who had been heard of at the last moment as a person who ought to be helped.

Dennis, who is in the diplomatic service, had come straight across from the Hague, by way of Rotterdam and Hull, and arrived before the main body of the house-party. He was on the balcony talking to Gregory Fall when the London contingent appeared; and Lady Maude, possibly with some idea of keeping her 'side-lines' together until she had more leisure to attend to them, brought Mrs. Vincent and the Princess over, introduced them to Fall and left them there to have tea.

Mrs. Vincent talked to Dennis. She had never seen Scatterwick Castle before, and was naturally impressed, as everybody must be who sees it for the first time, by its age-old feudal air, by the great stone Hall with its immense stone-balustraded staircase; and by the fact that while it turns one face down the hill to the little market-town of Scatterwick, and seems from that aspect to be set in the middle of civilisation, the other side, which is really the front, looks out over a vast waste of rolling moor.

'One might be a hundred miles from the next house,' was a remark that many people made in some form or another when they first saw that immense,

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desolate prospect; and Mrs. Vincent made it, automatically, as an opening when she began to talk to Dennis. He gave the appropriate reply, but he was not greatly interested in the psychic Mrs. Vincent. His eyes from the first moment being for the Princess, whose version of the inevitable topic was at least original, since she said the view reminded her of the Russian steppes.

She was certainly a very lovely creature, with a beautiful little head, very white skin, black hair and dark blue eyes, delicate and exotic, an effect that was heightened by the slight, lisping accent of her speech. Indeed, the sight of her brought even the hitherto unscathed young Lord Asprey across to join the group before tea was over; and presently they strolled away to look over the grounds. Mrs. Vincent had gone up to her own room, 'to rest' she said—she had the look of being in very indifferent health—and Dennis was left alone with Gregory Fall.

Inevitably they began to discuss the Princess.

'Never,' Fall said, 'have I seen anyone who looked the part better. I feel that I know all about her from reading Tolstoi. Have you any idea where Lady Maude picked her up?'

Dennis had some idea, having heard the story at lunch. 'She's by way of being a third-hand inspiration,' he told Fall. 'Lady Maude heard of her from her friend Sally Pollock, the Duchess of Liverpool, you know, who was just off to spend her honeymoon in Norway with her husband. They go for their honeymoon every August. And the Duchess, it seems, had heard of the Princess from someone else whose name was not mentioned. She's living with her mother in

two rooms in a tenement building somewhere south of the river. The mother was invited, too, but she was going to stay with some old friends in Devonshire.'

'Hm!' Fall commented, and then, 'you're in the diplomatic service, I hear.'

Dennis nodded.

'Do you get a lot of experience in this sort of thing?'

'What sort of thing?' Dennis asked.

'Escaped Russian Princes and what not?'

'I've met a few,' Dennis agreed.

'Many frauds among them?'

'A few. Why?'

'Interested, that's all,' Fall said. 'Queer the Princess should have said the view from here was like the Steppes. It isn't of course, not the least. I've seen them.'

'You're not hinting . . .' Dennis began.

'That the Princess is a fraud? Good Heavens, no,' Fall interrupted. 'That would be your job, not mine. With your experience and your trained intelligence, you'd be able, I suppose, to spot a deception of that sort, almost at sight?'

'Oh! I don't know. Hardly that,' Dennis replied.

There had been a suggestion of jeering in Fall's voice, and Dennis receiving an uneasy feeling that he was inclined to make fun of the diplomatic service, determined that he would be very alert and observant for the next day or two; more particularly as he realised that Fall had already been before him with his deductions. He was, no doubt, a man of quite unusual mentality, and had once, as a tour de force, written a sort of detective story which some people said was quite the most brilliant thing of its kind that had ever

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been done. But, in appearance at least, he was not attractive, being heavily, even clumsily built, with a big head and a coarsely-modelled, clean-shaven face, only partly redeemed by the shrewd intelligence of his quick pale-blue eyes.

By way of making a beginning, Dennis intermittently watched the Princess in the course of dinner. He found no difficulty in doing that. She was a delightful person to watch. Also, he tactfully tried to open the subject of her personality with Mrs. Vincent, who sat next to him and seemed to be the better for her rest.

She screwed up her eyes, when Dennis casually remarked that the Princess was the ideal Russian of fiction; and after a very brief observation of the lady in question, said: 'Possibly. Perhaps yes. Her aura has a tinge of green in the blue that is rather unusual. A touch of Eastern blood, no doubt, would account for that.' And then, before Dennis could follow that up, she continued:

'But honestly, Mr. Ashworth, there are times when one almost regrets one's powers in this direction. Do you know,' she lowered her voice almost to a whisper, 'I cannot bear even to look at Mr. Fall, surrounded as he is with horrible reds and yellows.'

'What does that mean?' asked Dennis, who knew nothing whatever of auric significances.

'Jealousy, suspicion, resentment,' Mrs. Vincent replied firmly. 'It makes me feel positively faint to be near the man.'

At the time Dennis was inclined to regard this diagnosis as mere 'bunkum'. He prided himself on being singularly free from prejudice with regard to the people he met.

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He danced with the Princess twice that evening, and would have danced with her more often if he had had the chance, but he attempted no detective work in his conversation. She volunteered nothing about her experiences during the Revolution, and he felt that it would be bad taste to open that topic himself. It was, indeed, the Princess herself who asked all the questions. She was greatly interested in the social positions and personalities of her fellow-guests—English society, as she confessed, being as yet entirely strange to her. Almost the only other topic of conversation between them was about animals. The Princess, it seemed, was devoted to animals, and gave Dennis a character sketch of a wonderful cat named 'Mimi' that she had left in charge of her mother who was going to take it with her down to Devonshire.

Dennis was immensely interested. Everything the Princess said was made fascinating by the animation of her face and the charm of her slight accent. If she had talked nothing but trade statistics he would have found them fascinating.

The party broke up early, as the men were going off directly after breakfast the next morning for a long day's shooting on the moors, but Dennis happened to have a few words with Fall in the smoking-room before he went to bed.

'Seems to be a case? What?' Fall said, coming over to him.

'I don't get you,' Dennis replied.

Fall looked a trifle sly. 'Oh! you diplomatists are always so infernally careful,' he remarked.

'Honestly, I don't get you,' Dennis remonstrated. 'What do you mean by a case?'

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Fall glanced across to the other side of the room where young Lord Asprey was talking sport with half-a-dozen other men. 'I only meant,' he said, 'that I fancy our host is badly smitten at last.'

Dennis had been so ready to fall in love with the Princess himself that he had overlooked the possibility of Lord Asprey's doing the same thing.

'D'you mean that Asprey . . .' he began.

'You hadn't noticed it?' Fall enquired with a mocking lift of his eyebrow.

Dennis was annoyed both by the suggestion that he had a rival, and that Fall had again got in ahead of him.

'No. I think you're wrong about that,' he said. 'I've known Asprey all my life, and he isn't the sort of fellow who would fall in love easily.'

'Ah well! I haven't had your experience, of course,' Fall returned, sardonically, 'either of Lord Asprey's character or of drawing rapid inferences from slight indications. No doubt, I've made a mistake. Good-night.'

After that Dennis was more anxious than ever to prove that Fall's cleverness had overshot the mark; but, unfortunately, the developments of the next two days showed only too clearly that his inferences concerning young Lord Asprey's instant conquest by the Princess was amply justified. For after being immune all his life the young lord of Scatterwick had fallen in love with the fervent desperation of a boy of eighteen. And Dennis after one or two fits of resentment, decided not to enter the lists against him.

There were various reasons which influenced this decision, one of them being that the Princess herself had repelled all his attempts to flirt with her. But he

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was not badly hit (he had made love to every pretty woman he had met for the last fifteen years), and a talk he had with Lady Maude on the evening of the third day of the Princess's visit, gave him an excellent excuse for changing his mind.

They were sitting together in what is known as the 'Music Gallery', watching the others dance; the truth being that Dennis was slightly huffed by the Princess's tactful but perfectly steady refusal to give him the least encouragement.

There was a touch of annoyance in his voice as he turned to Lady Maude and said, 'Looks rather as if Marcus were going in off the deep end this time.'

'Yes. I'm a little uneasy about him,' she replied.

'Oh! Why?' Dennis asked.

'Because he's so terribly in earnest,' she said. 'He has always been like that, you know; so set on anything he does. Once he has made up his mind, there's no doing anything at all with him. And if anything goes wrong with this affair, I'm afraid he might do something desperate; either go big-game shooting and never come back, or at the best make a vow of celibacy or something equally silly.'

Dennis had not realised till then all that Asprey's sudden infatuation might imply. He himself had always taken such affairs lightly enough, but he saw now that what had been to him a mere flirtation, might be to his friend, Marcus, a matter of life and death.

'She's certainly very charming,' he commented.

'I fancied you were a trifle *épris*, yourself,' Lady Maude rallied him.

'I'm cured already,' he said. 'For one thing she doesn't favour me; and for another I give place

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respectfully to that *grande passion* which has not so far overcome me personally. But look here, Maude, there's no reason is there, why Marcus shouldn't marry her?'

'My dear Dennis, how should *I* know?' she returned. 'I have tried to pump her a little about herself; but the moment one mentions the word "Russia", she looks so terribly wistful and unhappy that one simply can't press her. And Sally, who is the only person who can tell me anything, won't have an address that one can write to before September.'

'You don't know for certain if she is what she pretends to be, even,' Dennis ventured.

Lady Maude pursed her mouth. 'She certainly looks the part,' she said.

'Rather too much, perhaps,' Dennis suggested.

'Not that that would make the least difference to Marcus's intentions,' Lady Maude commented, concluding: 'However, don't let us meet trouble half way. There's nothing to do in any case, but wait and see.'

They had to wait no longer than the next evening for a new and altogether unexpected development.

All the guests were in the big Hall when dinner was announced, and they had already started for the dining-room when Lord Asprey said loudly enough for everyone to hear: 'Wait a minute, the Princess isn't down yet.'

No one else had noticed her absence till that moment. The whole party, with the exception of the Princess and Mrs. Vincent, had been on the moors until nearly seven o'clock, and were tired and hungry. Lady Maude looked round and then said to the butler, 'Better sound the gong, Harrison.'

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That was a thing done at Scatterwick on rare occasions only. The gong was an enormous brass affair that the late Lord Asprey had brought back from India, and it set up a perfect roar at the least touch. In a modern house it would not have been so bad, but the Great Hall at Scatterwick is all stone, floor, walls, ceiling, staircase; and the echoes that that gong set going were simply overpowering. Everyone in the town, Dennis thought, must surely have heard it.

But it did not produce the Princess.

The search that immediately followed elicited the facts that the Princess was certainly not in the Castle, but had been seen in walking dress on the Terrace about eleven o'clock by a member of the domestic staff, who presumed that she was going to join the luncheon-party on the Moors. No one had seen her since. Mrs. Vincent had kept her bed all day with a severe psychic headache. Finally, all the Princess's luggage and wearing apparel were still in her room. The lady's maid who had attended her, said that she believed nothing had been taken but her hat and gloves.

Lord Asprey leapt instantly to his own solution of the mystery. 'Of course she came out to try and find us,' he said, 'and has got lost on the moors.'

'Pretty difficult thing to do, wouldn't it?' Fall put in. 'Seeing that you can't get out of sight of the Castle, anywhere within ten miles?'

Asprey did not even bother to look at him as he replied, 'Fainted, probably through exhaustion or something. Who's coming with me to make a search-party?'

'But, Marcus, do you think it's likely she would

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have gone out to join the guns?' Lady Maude asked. 'You know she wouldn't come because she can't bear to see anything killed.'

But Lord Asprey was not in a state of mind to listen to reasonable arguments. He would not consent even to have dinner before setting out. 'Take something in my pocket,' he said. 'It'll be dark in an hour's time. You coming, Dennis?'

Dennis went; together with two other members of the shooting party, nearly the whole of the male domestic staff and such members of the police force as could be urged to the task by Asprey's fervent instructions over the telephone.

From the moment when it had become certain that the Princess was not in the Castle, young Lord Asprey never appeared to have a moment's doubt that he would find her on the moor.

It was, indeed, broad daylight before he gave up hope. There had been a full moon, wanly melting into the sky as the sun rose, and the tedious search had lasted all night for him and Dennis. The other members of the party had dropped off one by one; either with a protest that it was no good going on any longer or slipping quietly away, without excuse.

Dennis falling with fatigue—he had been on his feet for the best part of twenty-four hours—was nearly asleep as he walked, but Asprey seemed to be endowed with super-human powers of endurance.

'If she isn't out here, where can she be?' he argued desperately. 'I mean to say is there any other reasonable explanation of her going away like that?'

'Got to remember that she is a Russian, you know,' Dennis mumbled, feeling utterly unequal to the

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solution of any mental or psychological problems at that moment.

'What difference does that make?' Asprey asked.

'Well, according to Russian fiction, they do do the most unaccountable things,' Dennis said.

'The Princess didn't strike me as being a bit like that,' Asprey said; and Dennis agreed with him. He would have agreed with anything just then to save himself the trouble of thinking.

He went to bed as soon as he had had some breakfast, and was out of the search until four o'clock the same afternoon; but he missed nothing for no further light had been thrown either on the cause or the means of the Princess's disappearance. Lord Asprey, after a short rest, had gone out again to the Moors.

Dennis, still feeling rather slack, was alone on the Terrace at six o'clock when he was joined by Fall, who sat down by him and opened the conversation by saying: 'Now I suppose that you, like a diplomat and a sensible man, are quietly thinking out this pretty little problem, instead of rushing aimlessly all over the place without rhyme or reason?'

'I? Oh! yes,' Dennis replied. 'Seems the only thing to do.'

'And how far have you got with your inferences?' Fall enquired.

'Not very far,' Dennis admitted, trying to conceal his annoyance at the jeering tone of the other's voice. 'To begin with, of course, we have to remember that we are dealing with a Russian.'

'Ah!' Fall commented with an inflexion that seemed to convey a doubt even of that.

'Well, aren't we?' Dennis demanded,

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‘Perhaps. It’s quite possible,’ Fall replied. ‘But in a case of this kind, it is essential to consider *all* the possibilities; and in my opinion it is as well to take nothing for granted until the weight of the evidence demands it. I have not, obviously, had your experience, but personally I should not have begun with that assumption.’

‘Well, how *would* you begin, then?’ Dennis asked. The fellow was getting on his nerves.

‘The first thing to determine surely is where she has gone,’ Fall said, ‘and my first enquiries this morning were directed to the railway station.’

‘What did you find out there?’ Dennis prompted him.

‘Nothing very definite,’ Fall admitted. ‘Yesterday, it seems, was market-day in Scatterwick; and the station-people were unusually busy. From one or two vague descriptions I received, however, it is certainly *possible* that the Princess may have left by the 11.45, a slow train that takes, I found, two hours and a half to reach York, where it connects with the London express. Further than that, however, we cannot go at present without some kind of organised official enquiry by the police, which is hardly yet warranted by the circumstances, seeing that there is no law to forbid a guest leaving a house without saying good-bye to her hostess.’

‘But Good Lord,’ Dennis protested, ‘she didn’t even take her luggage with her. What possible reason could she have for running away like that?’

‘Ah! That,’ Fall returned, rising, ‘is for *you* to think out. All I can pretend to do is to give you another suggestion or two to work upon. Now, we

wait for you to give us the experience of your diplomatic training.'

Dennis most sincerely wished that he could solve the mystery if it were only to score off Fall, whose ironical insinuations he found most peculiarly irritating; the more so, perhaps, because the fellow was so undoubtedly clever. There was no denying that his method was the only scientific way of going about the enquiry. But the more Dennis cudgelled his brain the more hopelessly puzzled he became; and the more evident it appeared to him that there were no facts to go upon, nor any chance as yet of obtaining them.

Lord Asprey returned about seven o'clock, having at last definitely given up all hope of finding the Princess on the Moor. He was beginning, now, to show the strain of the past thirty hours, and looked utterly dejected. He hardly spoke a word at dinner, and, indeed, no one had much to say; the company having reached the stage at which they had at last become conscious of repeating themselves. There was not, indeed, a possible remark concerning the Princess's disappearance that had not already grown wearisome by constant repetition. And when, as Lady Maude was preparing to leave the table, Fall suddenly addressed the company at large, beginning with the firm announcement, 'I have a suggestion to make,' everyone, including Lord Asprey, gave him their eager attention, with a feeling of relief.

'It is not, I know,' Fall said, evidently enjoying the interest he was arousing, 'a suggestion that is likely to meet with the approval of our friend Mr. Ashworth, seeing that it is not a method founded, as it undoubtedly should be, on observation and logic. But since

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we have not so far discovered a Sherlock Holmes or an Auguste Dupin, either in the Castle or in the local police-force, it will be as well, perhaps, to attempt some less scientific measures.'

Dennis suspected from the conversation he had had on the Terrace in the afternoon, that Fall was putting up some kind of bluff to disguise his real purpose, but no one else seemed to have the least suspicion of him, even when he finally announced his proposal.

'I happen,' he continued, 'whether fortunately or unfortunately, to have unusual power of seeing visions in the crystal when the conditions are favourable. And I feel that the conditions at the moment are as favourable as they could possibly be; quite remarkably so. The thoughts of all of us are concentrated upon a single subject, and there is a strong probability that at least one of us may be *en rapport* with the Princess. Also,' when he reached this point he looked directly at Mrs. Vincent, 'we shall have the assistance of a brilliantly gifted medium, endowed with very rare and wonderful psychic abilities, and the possessor, I understand, of a valuable crystal.'

Mrs. Vincent, now the centre of interest, shuddered and turned pale. 'I am dreadfully sorry'; she said; 'but I—I couldn't. Really it's quite impossible.'

A low murmur of disappointed protest greeted this announcement. Everyone was eager to make the experiment. 'Oh! but why not?' 'Couldn't you try?' 'Surely in a case like this. . . .' came from various parts of the table, but Dennis guessed that Mrs. Vincent would have succeeded in resisting the moral pressure that was being put upon her, if a social responsibility had not been added to it.

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'I should be so grateful if you would try Mr. Fall's suggestion, Mrs. Vincent,' Lady Maude said. It was almost a command, and Asprey gave it additional force by adding, 'Frightfully glad if you could.'

Mrs. Vincent closed her eyes for a moment as if she were seeking some inner guidance, then getting up from the table, she said:

'Very well, Lady Maude, I will go and fetch the crystal.'

'Couldn't you send someone for it?' Fall put in quickly.

'On no account,' Mrs. Vincent replied, and left the room before Lady Maude had time to thank her.

All the party crowded out into the Hall to wait for her. She was away for some minutes, and nearly everyone was staring up at the landing looking out for her when she appeared. And then at the head of the principal flight, she seemed to stumble and either let fall, or threw down, the crystal with such violence, that it leaped from the stone step on which it fell clear into the Hall, where Dennis ran forward and brought off a very neat catch. It must certainly have been a genuine crystal, for it was not even chipped.

'Were you expecting that?' said a voice in Dennis's ear as he recovered his balance.

'Expecting it? No. Why?' he asked.

Fall did not answer that directly, but as he took the crystal Dennis heard him murmur something about the eye being quicker than the intelligence.

Mrs. Vincent made one further attempt to avoid the experiment when the party were assembled in the drawing-room. She was already seated at the table

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then, with all the lights except one small reading-lamp, extinguished, the crystal cuddled up in a black cloth on the table, and Fall sitting beside her.

'Now,' he said, 'would you mind holding my hand, Mrs. Vincent?'

'Oh! I can't,' she said. 'It's impossible. I can't do it.'

'Nonsense,' Fall returned brusquely, and, grasping her left hand in his right without further ado, he began to gaze into the crystal.

For perhaps a couple of minutes, there was perfect silence. All the onlookers, even the most sceptical, were thrilled by a sense of expectation; and when Fall began to mutter in a low, half-audible voice, Dennis said that he felt as if a trickle of cold water was running down his back.

'Mist, mist—dissolving . . . red spots . . . no, a red wall, it looks like a red-brick wall,' Fall mumbled, and then his voice grew clearer and stronger as he continued: 'A high red-brick wall; an immense wall; retreating; becoming a building, a huge block of a building. It looks like flats. I can nearly read the name C A S . . . Casterman? No! Casterton Mansions? Don't take away your hand, please, Mrs. Vincent. I'm not sure. Everything has gone grey and dark. I seem to be inside a passage. There's a door opposite to me with a number on it in brass figures. Eighty-eight or thirty-three. Thirty-three. The door has opened, and I can see the figure of a young woman. She has her hands before her face. She looks desperately unhappy. She . . . Ah!'

Mrs. Vincent had snatched away her hand, and he stopped abruptly.

'Look here, Fall,' broke out Lord Asprey. 'Do you mean that that person you saw was the Princess?'

Fall paused as if he were carefully weighing every possibility, before he looked up at Lord Asprey, and then said, with a sinister smile, and a side glance at Mrs. Vincent:

'As to that, Lord Asprey, you would, I think, be better advised to ask the Princess's mother.'

'Eh? What? What the devil are you talking about?' Lord Asprey demanded angrily; but before Fall had time to reply, Mrs. Vincent interrupted the scene by suddenly collapsing in a dead faint.

They lifted her on to a sofa and began to apply the usual restoratives; and then the guests, feeling that there might be some rather delicate matters to discuss when she revived, all moved out into the Hall, leaving her alone with Lady Maude and her brother.

No one, however, once the party were back in the Hall, had any hesitation in interrogating Fall. They were all round him at once, firing questions at him from all sides. Fall, himself, was fairly bursting with satisfaction and importance, Dennis said, and added that he had wanted badly to kick the fellow before, but never so badly as he did then.

'If you will give me a chance,' Fall began, making a gesture inviting everyone to sit down; and then having waited a moment for silence, continued:

'It may have been the presence of a distinguished young diplomatist among us that gave me the idea of trying to solve the mystery of the Princess's disappearance by the methods of Auguste Dupin; and, as perhaps some of you may know, I once had a little success with a treatment of that method in fiction.

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Also, oddly enough, on the day that I was introduced to the Princess and Mrs. Vincent, it crossed my mind as a possibility that they might have got their invitations here on false pretences. I am not, I confess, one of those happy people who never question the surface of appearances, who take everything and everybody for granted, on their own valuation.

‘However, when the mystery was fairly presented, I set to work in earnest. My suspicions were aroused in the first instance by the fact that on the day of her disappearance the Princess and Mrs. Vincent had each given excuses for not joining the rest of the party on the moors. The Princess’s plea was that her love for animals and birds was so great that she had a horror of seeing anything shot; Mrs. Vincent’s the more hackneyed excuse of a headache. I questioned both excuses, and inferred that some kind of private interview had become essential between them, while the rest of us were out of the way. Subsequent enquiry at the railway station, led me to believe that the Princess had, in fact, departed by the 11.45 train.

‘Unfortunately, anything like a decent clue failed me after that until, this afternoon, I ventured on the slight dishonesty of examining the contents of the Castle letter-box; posting a letter there, and then on the pretence of having forgotten to enclose something in it, persuading Harrison to unlock the box for me. It was a happy shot. There were not many letters in the box, and the third one I saw was addressed to Miss Vincent, at 33, Casterton Mansions.’

Fall waited a moment to receive the acknowledgment of a whisper of admiration, or surprise, that ran round his audience, before proceeding:

‘That was evidence, but not by any means conclusive, and it was then I devised the little entertainment of this evening to put it to the test—with the results that you have seen. Mrs. Vincent is an exceedingly clever woman. One must do her that justice; and I am not sure whether I admire her more for the ingenuity she showed in procuring invitations for herself and her charming daughter to Scatterwick, or for the insight that made her suspicious of me to the point even of attempting to smash her crystal rather than face the ordeal she saw in front of her. Apropos of that, by the way, I think she might have seen the ordeal through, difficult as it was, if it had not been for the value of my unexpected information about her own address, a block of flats that I happen to know quite well. It was that which finally penetrated her defences. I may tell you that all through our little séance, she was struggling quietly to get her hand away from me.’

‘But look here, Fall,’ Dennis broke in, as Fall stopped, ‘that’s all very fine and very clever; but you don’t in the least explain *why* the Princess, or Miss Vincent, if you like, ran away in such an extraordinary manner.’

Fall raised his eyebrows and smiled with an immense condescension. ‘Oh! my dear Ashworth, do you never draw any inferences about human motives in your profession?’ he enquired.

Now whatever Dennis’s failings in shrewdness or capacity for hard work, there was at least one thing in which he could give tricks to Gregory Fall, and that was in breeding. This was not the first time he had been sneered at in public by the fellow, but he could keep his temper and his countenance.

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‘Well, I give you best over this, Fall,’ he replied quietly, ‘and I fancy we should all like to hear your explanation.’

Fall waved his hand. ‘Necessarily guesswork, of course’, he said airily, ‘guesswork, as yet, that is to say, though I expect we shall soon have ample confirmation from the next room. Meanwhile, might I suggest that Miss Vincent, who is unquestionably a very attractive and charming young lady, entered at first into the spirit of her mother’s plan to win a rich and titled husband, rather by way of a girlish joke; that having arrived here she began to regret the deception; and that when she found her host doing the very thing her mother had planned that he should, her heart mis-gave her altogether? That seems to me in character. Then I picture yesterday’s scene with her mother; and if I know anything of Mrs. Vincent, she meant to carry the thing through; insisted on going on with the deception at any cost, at least until Lord Asprey was safely hooked. And, in sheer desperation, her daughter, no doubt intimidated by her mother’s personality, obeyed the impulse of the moment and took the easiest way out of the difficulty by running away.’

Such was in essence the story that Dennis told me on the plage that morning, but at that point he stopped short, shrugged his shoulders and stared out over the sea.

‘Well, what happened?’ I asked. ‘Did Mrs. Vincent confess? And did Asprey, after all, marry her daughter? I fancy remember seeing that he had married someone a few months ago?’

‘I began by telling you that this story was intended as a warning,’ Dennis remarked.

‘Well, it has been,’ I said. ‘A warning not to go

into the diplomatic service unless you've got the kind of mind possessed by that ghastly bounder, Gregory Fall. His name was not on the list of New Year's honours by the way.'

'Nor likely to be,' Dennis replied. 'Nor is yours my friend, so long as you share with the majority of mankind the foolish habit of jumping to conclusions.'

'How's that?' I asked.

'Don't,' Dennis advised me, 'forget Fall's own advice that in a problem of this sort, it is necessary to consider *all* the possibilities.'

'Do you mean to say . . . ?' I began.

'I mean to say,' Dennis continued firmly, laying his hand on my arm, 'that even while we all stood there gaping at Fall's cleverness, there came a ring at the big bell outside the Hall entrance, an old-fashioned apparatus, but just the kind of thing you would expect there. It always had a rather dramatic effect, but on that occasion, when we were all rather strung up, it really sounded quite weird. I don't know what I or anyone expected, exactly. But I know that when Harrison opened the big doors, and we saw the Princess outside carrying a big wicker basket, we all got the start of our lives.

'She came straight in smiling, and looking as fresh as paint. "Oh! I suppose you've all quite finished dinner", she said, as if nothing out of the way had happened. "I'm sorry I'm so late, but you see yesterday morning I was going down into the town and I met a telegraph messenger who had a telegram for me from my mother, that I had been expecting all the day; and, oh! dear, my poor mother, she is so terribly absent-minded and forgetful since her great trouble,

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and she had telegraphed to me to say that she had but that moment remembered having left our poor Mimi all alone in the flat. So what could I do? I did not know whom to telegraph to, and there seemed nothing but to go and fetch our poor Mimi, myself. And I did not get home until nearly ten o'clock, so it was too late to return at once; and this morning I was not sure that the poor Mimi was fit to travel. But I do not see Lady Maude, and I wish to ask her if we might have a little dinner, Mimi and I, as we are rather hungry.'

'Yes, that was the point,' Dennis concluded, 'to take *all* the conditions into consideration; and the chief of them was in this case that the Princess was a Russian, and that Russians do sometimes behave in fact as they do in Russian fiction. However, I was glad that we scored off Fall. He left the next morning. Couldn't face us again. Mrs. Vincent was quite right. He *was* one of that jealous, resentful sort of fellows who can't bear anyone but themselves to be in the limelight. That was why he was always trying to score off me. I happened, you know, to be an old friend of Asprey and his sister, and Fall was only just a casual protégé, and realised that he was something of an outsider. Personally, I can quite understand Mrs. Vincent having such an intense, intuitive dislike of him that she fainted from sheer disgust at having to hold his hand. She was an extraordinarily sensitive, clever creature, and bucked up wonderfully after he had gone—did some perfectly amazing feats of psychometry. . . .

'Yes; it was the Princess Asprey married last September. A lovely, charming creature, but extraordinarily Russian.'

THE TRAP WITHOUT A BAIT



I

LATE in the evening I came to the edge of a new town, and even as I approached it I perceived that in some as yet unrealised manner it differed from any other town I had yet visited. For a few moments I was puzzled to account for this air of strangeness, but, pausing on the very threshold of the first street, I saw that the difference lay in the abruptness with which the town ended. Here was no sign of suburb nor the ravel of meaner houses that commonly divides the city from the surrounding country. As I then stood I had one foot on the open road, the other on the precise regularity of a paved street. It was as if by the exercise of some rare magic the place had been designed and builded in the air, and had, when completed, been lowered and firmly crushed into its place.

For a time I paused on the thought of this possibility, for I have ever been alert to avoid the snares of human wit. I have seen how ingeniously men will frame a trap for the slothful intelligence, tempting the unthoughtful with a specious imitation of truth, once fallen into which he shall thereafter accept without question, and for the remainder of his life proclaim his cage as the one sure and continuing reality.

Reflecting on this, I decided, nevertheless, to continue my way, for I was both hungry and tired, the night had come, and I greatly desired to find some house

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of call at which I might rest. Moreover, I was in some sort protected against the peculiar magic I feared in this place by an exorcism of my own devising, the recitation of which has saved me on many occasions from the seductions of some cunning illusion. So, grasping my staff, I lifted my head and entered the strange town, repeating over and over again to myself the formula: Truth is that which we will to believe; and there are as many aspects of truth as there are diversities in the mind of man. Let everyone, therefore, seek his own belief, since none but a fool will accept truth at second-hand.

My first thought on entering the town was that it was populous and well lit. Every house showed a light behind its closely-drawn blind, and the street-lamps, spaced with an exquisite regularity, burned with a clear and steady flame. Yet as my step beat ringingly on the pavement the sound of it was so resonant that I might have walked in a city of the dead. I paused and listened; and the silence of the place was that of a waiting presence rigid with expectation. No least whisper of voices nor rustle of movement came to my ears. I felt that if I were to shout my name aloud the echo of it would resound from the great arch of the solemn sky.

Constraining myself to walk on tiptoe, I crept forward, now and again withholding my breath, my every sense an ear for the least indication of life. But not a soul moved abroad in the whole length and width of the town, nor so far as I could judge did any living being stir behind the discreet blinds that shrouded those lighted interiors.

By now I was come into the midst of the town, and

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I paused again to argue with myself. The character of the street in which I now stood exhibited no trace of difference from the one that had been my means of entry. Each house was a replica of its neighbour, and each presented a face of perfect decorum. I had passed no house that differed from another in design, nor any that did not display the single light burning behind its screened window. 'Why then,' I asked myself, 'should a man be afraid in so seemly and decorous a place? What apprehension prevent me that I should not boldly knock and seek admission at one of those sedate and seemly front doors?' Yet I will confess that I suffered many tremors of misgiving before I made the essay.

The echoes of my knock, timorous though it had been, clattered and rocked down the silences of the street as if by my feeble effort I had started every knocker in the town. Indeed it seemed to me that I could hear my summons repeated faintly and more faintly on each door till at last the weak ghost of an infinitely distant tapping ticked out into silence. But none answered my summons from within; and now I had no courage to repeat it.

I dare not say how long I had stood there before my hand crept nervously to the handle of the door. The handle turned without resistance. I opened the door softly and looked in. A dim light burned in the hall and I could see the decent furniture set with precision against its walls, but no other sign of human habitation. Neither hat nor coat hung upon the orderly row of pegs, nor could I discern a trace of that respectable litter which indicates the occupation of life. I crept cautiously forward and secretly opened the door of the

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room that I judged to contain the lamp which burned behind the discreet blind of the front window, and that room also was void of any evidence of humanity. There I saw the conventional apparatus of comfort, but no single article of the furnishing was set awry; every chair, every uniform volume in the glass-fronted book-case, every ornament on the mantel was marshalled with a strict regularity, awaiting that first touch of disorder which should give it an individual existence. And suddenly it seemed to me that the blank silence of the empty house was tense with the eagerness of hushed expectation.

Instantly I became aware of the dangers of a trap. This place was set; rigid with the tension of a spring that I might at any moment release. Mentally rehearsing my incantation I turned with infinite caution and crept out of the house, gently closing the front door behind me.

Yet was I safe even now? Might it not be that the whole town was but a cunning lure, tempting me to destruction? And as I looked fearfully about me, an unexpected and startling change came over the street in which I stood. From every ground floor window the light incontinently faded and was replaced by a similar light in the window of every bedroom.

Then, indeed, I was overcome by a very panic of terror, and, forgetting my caution, I raised a great cry of fear and fled, and as I fled the sound of my cry, the crack of my staff on the pavement, and the thud of my footsteps were taken up and multiplied a thousandfold, roaring and crashing through the desolation, so that it seemed as if, not I, but a great army fled in disastrous rout from the awful threat of that unholy place.

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And then as I crossed the threshold of the last paved street came what I at first took to be silence, with an amazement so sudden that my flight was instantly checked. I stood wonderstruck. Behind me lay the last outpost of that frozen town, and about me were once more the sweet night whisperings of my familiar world; the stir of wind in the hedge, the rustle of leaves, the movement of unseen life.

II

I told no one of my strange experience for many months thereafter, but it chanced one night that I made acquaintance in an inn with one whose knowledge of the world was so great that I was emboldened to relate to him a full account of my unique adventure. He listened with the closest attention to my story, and then to my surprise remarked: 'I know the place well. It is called the habitation of the middle-classes.'

'Habitation!' I protested. 'Did I not make it plain that from end to end of the town I saw no sign of a living soul.'

'Some say the middle classes have no souls,' he said. I stared at him in complete bewilderment.

'While others,' he continued, 'say that only the soul exists and that there is, in fact, no middle-class. For my own part, I will admit that I have never yet met one who confessed himself to be a member of that body.'

'Then who builded the town?' I asked. 'And who is responsible for its condition?'

'Ah, that,' said he, 'is a true magic, which I will explain to you. In the beginning, as I understand, it

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was found that, as there was no middle-class, it was necessary to invent one. So, if I have the story right, a conference was held of all the scholars and scribes, whereat after much debate certain qualifications were agreed upon by which this new creation of men's minds should be recognised; the essential being the qualification or condition of middleness. Thereafter the conference dispersed, but all those who lived by the pen agreed in their description of this new class. Accounts were printed of it in the pages of the news-sheet, in learned works of the various states of mankind, in many romances, and, indeed, in almost every form of literature both polite and vulgar. And it is now commonly acknowledged that by the acceptance of these various descriptions the thought conceived in the mind had taken actual form and substance. There remain, however, still two heresies, as I have already indicated, the one that this new creation has no soul, the other that it has no representative body. To which the mathematicians now add a third, arguing that the stipulated quality of middleness is indefinable as applied to a mass of people, since a geometrical mean is an ideal abstraction without magnitude and an arithmetical mean can consist of but a single number. Nevertheless, we know that an idea which is commonly accepted as valid by the majority of the people is exceedingly potent, and it is believed that the town you entered has been created in actual substance and is maintained perpetually in its present condition by the beliefs of mankind.'

'Yet none inhabits it,' I said as he paused.

He looked at me with a glance at once thoughtful and a little sly. 'Some day,' he said, 'men may be

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tempted to live there and acknowledge themselves. Is it not a pretty cage?’

I reflected on that for some moments before I answered him. And then, ‘But is it not a trap without a bait?’ I asked.

THE LAST TENANTS



I

IT was, I should have supposed, quite a difficult house to let—except to a honeymoon couple in the height of summer. It stood all alone in the pinewood, two miles from the station, more than a mile from what they called the village. There was no garden in the ordinary sense. Indications of a fence here and there among the pines seemed to suggest that the owner of the house had a right to, perhaps, a couple of acres as a private enclosure, but not a clod of earth had been turned. Anyone might trespass right up to the front door, without knowing that he had strayed out of the freedom of the wood. The delightful part of it was that there was no one to trespass.

The house itself pleased me well enough. There were two good rooms on the ground floor, each with a big French window opening with a ridiculously suburban air, straight into the wild. The kitchen offices were quite passable, and there was a force pump in the scullery that supplied water to the first floor. Upstairs were three excellent bedrooms and a bathroom. If the place had been planted down just as it was within a train ride of Town, it would have been snapped up at once. But out there, half an hour's walk from a station on a branch line with a poisonous service of trains; out there in the middle of a wood with nothing but a cart-track, almost unpassable in winter, to connect it with

civilisation; the place was, I judged, practically unlettable.

And yet this confounded old lawyer appeared as reluctant to let it to me, as if the place were the pick of the market.

It had been advertised in the 'Agony' column of *The Times*, and in the queerest way: 'Pinewood is to let, furnished or unfurnished.—William Pardew, 19 Old Square, Lincoln's Inn.' That advertisement had taken my fancy, and I had called on William Pardew without delay, to find him embarrassed and apparently very unwilling to accept me as a tenant. I had, however, persuaded the address and the keys of Pinewood from him and made my preliminary visit to the house. He had thought, I dare say, that the sight of the place would finally discourage me.

'I want that house—furnished,' I said firmly, on my second visit to Lincoln's Inn.

His hand trembled as he fumbled with his glasses. He was a white-haired, rather handsome man of not more than sixty-five or so, but he looked troubled and worn. 'Ah! yes. Furnished,' he muttered; 'that would in any case—be easier.'

'Very well, then. What about terms?' I pressed him. 'I am prepared, if necessary, to be generous.'

He shook his head as if that aspect of the business did not interest him; and, disregarding my question, said: 'I doubt if you'll ever get a servant to stay there. You might almost as well be living on a desert island.'

'I am fortunate in that respect,' I assured him. 'I have a man and his wife who are devoted to me and to each other. The three of us could be quite happy on an island.'

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He sighed heavily and rested his forehead on his hand, leaning forward over his desk.

'I should have to make one rather unusual stipulation,' he said at last without looking up. 'A—a most unusual stipulation.'

'Which is?' I urged impatiently.

'I should wish to continue the advertisement in *The Times*.'

I naturally jumped to the conclusion that he had some ulterior purpose in view. 'Look here!' I said firmly. 'I'll buy the place or take it on a 999 years' lease if it can't be sold, or . . .'

He stopped me with a wave of his hand. 'That's out of the question,' he said, 'at present. But I might let it to you, furnished, for, say, twelve months, if you will accept my condition.'

I frowned. 'The truth is,' I explained, 'that I want perfect quiet. It would bother me to have people coming down at any time . . .'

He held up his hand again. 'I shall send no one to see the place,' he said. 'You can have that in the agreement.'

'But . . .' I began.

'I can give you no explanation,' he broke in. 'I am willing to let you Pinewood furnished—for twelve months at a rental of—er—three pounds a week on—er—pretty much your own conditions, if you will agree to my single stipulation.'

'Oh! well! Of course,' I said; and then after a moment's thought I added: 'Is the place haunted, by any chance?'

He put his hand over his mouth, and I thought there were tears in his eyes as he said: 'I've never heard that it is.'

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After that there was no further difficulty. For a lawyer, he seemed to me to be very easy-going in the matter of conditions and references. And then, just as I was going, he startled me by saying, 'I've read your books. I—I'm a great admirer of yours. Er—I hope you'll be comfortable.'

He had retreated into his office and shut the door between us before I could reply.

A very decent old fellow, I decided, with a queer kink somewhere.

II

I had no trouble about getting into my new home. Harrison and his wife did all that for me. There was a wagonette to be hired from a man who lived near the station—with this you could get within about fifty yards of the house in dry weather, and it was magnificently fine all that September and October. The chief trouble was the carrying of my books for the last fifty yards; a trouble they got over by hiring a trolly.

When I arrived, everything was 'straight' except for the arrangement of these books, a job that no one could do for me, and that I, too, postponed until the next morning. My trouble was that, although there was, I judged, sufficient book-shelf accommodation, it was all littered up with stuff belonging to the last tenant, or owner, or whatever he was.

I sniffed fastidiously over his collection, that first evening. He must have been a scrappy, inconsecutive sort of reader. There were odd volumes of science, history, and philosophy; cheap editions of the classics; a lot of second-rate novels; old school-books; a collection of very ancient theological works that could only

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have come from the library of a parson; the tenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—the sort of tasteless accumulation that fills me with despair.

I looked round for some place to store the stuff in, and my eye lighted on a big fitted cupboard filling the recess between the fireplace and the window. I flung open the doors and was momentarily disgusted to find that this, too, was about a third full of books, flung in, apparently, helter-skelter. My disgust, however, was instantly forgotten when I looked a little farther. For there, on the top of the jumbled heap, were two books, the sight of which in any strange house still gives me a queer thrill of pleasure. To find them there, even though they seemed to have been flung away in disgust, was to receive the freedom of the house. Those unknown, mysterious former occupants must, at least, have read me, have sat here in this room, no doubt, thinking my thoughts, living with the people I had created.

I was suddenly eager to explore farther, and I thrilled again when I found my two other babies farther down in the heap. I knew then that the former tenants of Pinewood had been my friends. I determined to write to William Pardew and ask for their names. He might know their present address.

I did that at once; also, I played in imagination with the kind of letter I might write to those nice people who had had the taste to live in this deserted pinewood. I could tell them how I loved their house, that if they wished to return to it before my term was up, I would resign my tenancy, that . . .

I was meandering on in this strain when my attention was caught by the two book-cases with their

miscellaneous, repellent collection. I jumped up and went back to the cupboard. There was not a book in it that I would not have chosen myself. Indeed, over a dozen of them I actually had with me. There must, then, have been two kinds of reader in that house. One who had the use of the shelves, and the other of the cupboard. I was puzzled. Here was the beginning of a mystery, and the key to it might be found in the books themselves. I began to open them, only to be confronted by a still more intriguing puzzle. The blank leaf facing the title had been torn out of more than half of the volumes. Where it still remained it bore no inscription. There was but one faint beginning of a clue in the whole collection; a copy of *The Possessed* had been carelessly torn and the initial 'J' was still readable.

I went back to the book-shelves. There had been no destruction there, and most of the books bore the name of their owner written in a rather awkward hand. The name was Henry Coulson. It conveyed nothing to me except the significant fact that it did not begin with a 'J'. In the theological books I found 'Theodore Coulson', and in many cases dates, some of which went back to the 'sixties. But in no single volume of the whole collection did I find a name beginning with 'J'.

It was past twelve and the Harrisons had been in bed for a couple of hours by the time I had finished. I opened the French window and stood staring out into the darkness of the wood. The pines were talking among themselves in undertones with faint melancholy sighs and distracted twitterings. The young moon had already set and the night was as black as pitch.

How sweet and clean the pines smelt! And what a lot of names began with 'J'. There were Jane and

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Joan and Joyce and Jennifer and Joscelyn and Jessica—the six delicious dairy-maids in *Martin Pippin*. And, of course, Judith! The name of her whom I loved best in my own books was Judith.

III

I had been there a fortnight and September was nearly gone, but William Pardew had not answered my question with regard to the address of the owners or previous tenants.

The books of Henry and Theodore Coulson had been stacked neatly in the cupboard by Harrison, but 'J's' books were ranged with my own in the two book-cases, and whenever I looked at them, my mind was turned to a gentle curiosity. Nevertheless I did not write again to Pardew. I was afraid of bathos. Our dreams are so beautiful and facts so banal. I might discover that 'J' was merely . . . No! I would not entertain a single sacrilegious thought. I had my pleasant little mystery and I would keep it.

The queer advertisement that had attracted my attention still appeared twice a week in *The Times*. Pardew remained a pleasing enigma. I had not conceived of a single probable explanation of the tearing and subtle sorting of the two collections of books. Some day I would write a graceful fantastic story about these things. But, meanwhile, I would not ponder them too closely lest I should disappointingly hit upon a commonplace explanation.

And then came the evening of the last day of September.

I was sitting with a book after dinner, facing the French window, with my reading-lamp just behind my

right shoulder. The moon, now past the full, had not yet risen and I was somewhat impatiently awaiting it. On the last few nights I had gone for a stroll in the woods, as soon as the moon came swimming up into the eastern horizon. It seemed to me that I had never properly appreciated the wonder of moonrise before that autumn. We had had a succession of warm, windless nights, and it grieved me to think that, although the weather might hold for a couple of weeks or more, the moon, alas! would diminish night by night, and rise later and later, until . . .

I looked up, and for one confused instant I thought the moon had indeed risen and that I saw some distorted image of it reflected in the window-glass. Then my eyes, a trifle blinded by the white light that had been reflected from my open book, found their focus and I saw that a face was looking in at me.

That was all I could see: a face young and beautiful, but sad, discouraged and, it seemed to me, a little terrified. It swam, apparently disembodied, in the light of my lamp at about a woman's height from the ground. And its deeply shadowed eyes were, I thought, fixed upon me with a fascinated attention.

I dared not move. I was not afraid, but I wished in a sudden panic that my heart would begin to beat again. And, even as I felt the momentarily suspended pulse return, the face vanished, melted softly back into the night and disappeared.

I had heard nothing; seen nothing but that lovely ghost of a woman's face; and as I became conscious again of the room in which I was sitting—of the lamp at my elbow, the book in my hand, and the black screen of the window—I wondered if my vision had

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not been pure hallucination, an image momentarily projected from the retina of my own eyes. Moreover, now that I recalled the vision with an increasing calmness, I had a strong impression that somewhere, somehow, I had seen the same face before. Only—here was the absurdity—my impression was that I had seen the face quite recently—I who had seen no one but the Harrisons for a fortnight—and that at my first sight of it, it had not greatly interested me.

I jumped out of my chair and shook myself vigorously. Romance was very delightful, but I did not want to begin suffering from hallucinations. This was the result of being too much alone. I must not overdo it. I would go up to Town next week for a few days.

I walked over to the window and opened it. A dim arc of light was spreading in the east, and in a few minutes I should see the red-gold edge of the moon slip up behind the distant horizon of Chackmoor Common. I stood intensely still, watching and listening. The night was exquisitely, serenely quiet. I could hear no sound of human movement; nothing but the faint whispering sigh of the pines.

‘This sort of thing won’t do!’ I said aloud, and checked myself abruptly. The sound of my voice had been an unpleasant intrusion on the night. And, for some reason, I did not feel tempted to take my usual stroll through the wood. I closed the window, returned to my chair and sat down. I wanted to recall the exact circumstances, and particularly that odd impression of having seen before the face of my vision, and that quite recently. I stared fixedly at the window and tried to empty my mind of thought. And then, after a moment

or two, the thing began to come back to me. I saw the face again in imagination, but calmed, altered, and, yes, a trifle vulgarised . . . associated with . . . I had it . . . a late Victorian costume!

I leaped up and went over to the writing-table, opened one of the drawers and took out an old cabinet photograph left there, I presume, by the last inhabitants of Pinewood. The photograph was perhaps forty years old, yellow, faded, and spotted. It represented a young woman with a noticeable bust, a round column of a waist, an elaborate coiffure, and a bustle. Her figure was in profile, she stood by a table with a book in her hand—but her head was turned and her eyes had looked straight into the lens of the camera. I took it and examined it under the light of the lamp. Unquestionably there was a strong likeness.

How queer, I reflected philosophically, are the workings of the human mind! A couple of days ago I had come across this photograph, glanced at it casually, and thrown it back into the drawer without a single sensation of interest. And then, in some moment of abstraction, this memory had come back, the face changed, and idealised but still recognisable, and had been projected on the convenient screen of the black glass.

I carelessly turned the photograph over, and my blood seemed to run suddenly cold. On the back was written in a pointed hand, 'With love from Judith'.

IV

I should never have made a detective. I am what the philosophers call an a-priorist. I work towards the solution that I desire, and clues or facts worry me.

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When they do not fit my desired solution, I overlook them.

This was what I made of the perplexities of Pinewood: the Judith of the photograph was old Pardew's wife, and they had had a daughter named after her mother. It was the daughter who had read my books, and both she and her mother were dead. Also, it was the spirit of the daughter who had peered in at me through the window. I hoped that she would come again. I had been re-reading *The Gateless Barrier* until three o'clock in the morning, in order to learn how I could recall the spirit and speak to her.

I had no shadow of doubt that the face I had seen was that of the woman I had been waiting and longing for, all the thirty-two years of my life!

It was, no doubt, this last certainty that led me to overlook various important details, the most significant of which were the queer advertisement that had brought me here, and the extraordinary unsuitability of Pinewood as a residence for a practising solicitor. The torn books I put down to the natural sentiments of poor old Pardew. As for Henry and Theodore Coulson, I dismissed them with a wave of the hand. Your professional detective lays far too much stress on such facts as these. I could account for the Coulsons' books in half a dozen ways.

And then all my romance was scattered by the first appearance of the old lady on the morning after my vision.

I found her trespassing in what should have been the front garden, and I was a little annoyed. I wondered if old Pardew had broken his agreement and had sent her to inspect the house?

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She was a funny, bundled-up old thing, dressed most noticeably, in a mantle and a bonnet; with white hair and spectacles and a black spotty veil.

I drew myself up sternly, raised my eyebrows, and said 'Yes?' in an inquiring tone. I didn't want to be actually rude, but I was not going to pretend that I was glad to see her.

'Are you—are you *living* here, now?' she asked. She had quite a charming voice.

'I have taken the house furnished for a year,' I said.

She sighed deeply, and then looked round as if she were seeking some place where she might sit down.

'Won't you come in?' I said, relenting. 'If there's anything I can tell you . . .'

We were within five yards of my open study window, and I made a gesture towards it. She nodded quickly and walked ahead of me into the house. When she got into my study, I saw her give one sharp glance round the room before she dropped into the arm-chair with an effect of being tired out.

'Can I . . .' I began, but she anticipated me.

'No, no, thank you,' she said in that nice, rich voice of hers. 'It's only that I should like to ask you a question or two about—about the people who lived here before, if I may?'

'Oh! yes, certainly, certainly,' I said, and instantly my foolish mind began to bubble with the details of my romantic story. Before I had time, however, to shape the thing in my mind, she continued:

'Their name was Coulson.'

For a moment or two I sincerely disliked that old lady. I recognised her now. She represented fact,

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the spirit of the commonplace. She had come to kill my romance.

‘Was it?’ was my only comment.

‘Didn’t you know that?’ she asked, with a touch of surprise.

‘I suppose I ought to have inferred it,’ I grumbled.

‘But then whom did you take the house from?’ she went on.

‘A solicitor in Lincoln’s Inn,’ I explained.

I wished that I could see her face, but the spotty black veil concealed it most effectively. After my last remark, a kind of stillness came over her that I found rather alarming. Her hands—she was wearing horrible cotton gloves—were lying loosely clasped in her lap, her head was resting against the back of the chair, and she was so absolutely motionless that I was not sure whether or not she might have fainted, I have had so little experience with old ladies.

‘I’m afraid you’ve overtired yourself,’ I said anxiously. ‘It’s a long walk from the station—all uphill—and a beastly road. . . .’

‘I’m not overtired,’ she said quietly. ‘Will you please tell me if, by any chance, you know where Mr. Henry Coulson is living now?’

‘Absolutely no idea,’ I confessed. ‘I shouldn’t have known his name even, if it had not been in his books. And when I wrote to the solicitor to ask—er—a question or two about the people who were here before I came, he did not answer my letter.’

She straightened herself in her chair. ‘Why did you want to know?’ she asked sharply. ‘Had you heard something about them in the village?’

I shook my head. ‘I haven’t spoken to a soul,

except my own man and his wife, since I've been here,' I said.

'Then what was it you wanted Mr. Pardew to tell you?' she asked, still with a critical note in her voice.

I made a note of the fact that she knew about Pardew. I had not mentioned his name. But her question I found difficult to answer. I could not tell her that I had written because 'J' had got my books. . . .

'Well,' I began—I am an inferior liar in real life—I—that is, you know, I like this place—immensely. . . .

'Do you really?' she said, cutting me short, and then went on, 'But I am wasting your time—and my own.'

She stood up, apparently intending to go; but as I also got to my feet, wondering whether I should not, now, ask *her* a few questions, she turned her back on me and began to examine the book-cases. I saw her give a queer little start of surprise when she saw 'J's' books, to which I had given pride of place in the two middle shelves.

'Who put those books there?' she asked in a low voice, still with her back to me.

'I did,' I said.

'Why?'

I was blushing furiously, but she couldn't see that, fortunately. 'I—they are the sort of books I like,' I explained.

'The other books here are all yours?' she continued, with a glance at the second book-case, that would have given me her profile if it had not been hidden by her stupid veil.

'Yes,' I admitted.

Her hand went out to the shelf in front of her and disengaged Harold Frederic's masterpiece, *The Dam-*

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nation of Theron Ware, which I had in the American edition.

'I've often wanted to read that,' she said.

'May I lend it to you?' I volunteered at once. She might be old and abominably dressed, but those things count for nothing between people who have the same taste in books.

'Oh! I—thank you,' she stammered. 'But yes, I would be glad if I might take it with me. I am staying at the little inn by the station . . . for to-night and . . . and there is, of course, nothing to read there. But I will be sure to return it to-morrow.'

'Do take it,' I urged her, 'and to-morrow you shall tell me what you think of it.'

'It's very good of you,' she said, turning to face me. 'I'm really very grateful. There's simply nothing to do down there among all those strange people.'

I was surprised at that. I had already taken it for granted that she knew all about the place. Indeed, I had had a wild idea that she might be old Pardew's wife or something.

'You don't know this place, then?' I suggested.

'Oh!' she exclaimed on an emotional note that a little stirred me, and then added: 'The people at the inn are new. They've only just come there.'

Unless I began to cross-examine her, there was nothing more to be said, and I felt that any questions I might ask would come better the next day, after she had read *Theron Ware* and we were on easier terms. But she was apparently still waiting for something or didn't know quite how to get away.

'I'm sure you will like that book,' I said in a leave-taking tone, to give her her opportunity.

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'Oh! the book! Yes,' she answered, as if she had been recalled from some other world of thought, and suddenly sat down again in my arm-chair.

I was not sure, just then, if she was not going to be rather a nuisance, and I sat down myself with the air of a man who is ready to get up again at a moment's notice.

'I wonder if . . .' she began, and hesitated, staring at me, I inferred, through her veil.

'Please . . .' I said, and that seemed enough, for she took me up at once by saying:

'I know I have already bothered you enough—a perfect stranger—but we seem to like the same books, don't we? And—oh! could I ask you to do something for me, and not ask why?'

I instantly forgot about her being a nuisance. She was certainly a funny old thing in some ways—but I was inclined to like her, if it were only because of her beautiful voice and because we had the same taste in literature.

'Of course I will; yes,' I said warmly.

'I want you,' she said, beginning to fumble for something that was presently revealed as a bag containing a purse, 'to—to send a telegram with a prepaid reply to Mr. Pardew—in your own name—asking him for the present address of Henry Coulson. I hope it won't be a great bother, but I'd sooner not send it myself. I—I don't want to go into the village.'

I eagerly assured her that it would be no trouble at all, and pretended not to see the two shillings she laid on the table.

'Thank you so very much,' she said, getting up briskly, 'and I will come up to-morrow morning, if I

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may, for the answer to the telegram, and to return the book. And—just one more favour—if I might borrow, also, a dear favourite of mine to read again—in case Harold Frederic doesn't quite last me out. May I?

She hardly waited for my consent, and this time she found no difficulty in getting out of the room, although I would have liked now to stop her in order to shake hands with her—even through her horrible cotton gloves. Indeed, I could almost have kissed her through the spotty veil.

The 'favourite' she had taken, so fervently, was the dearest of all my babies—the one I thought of as the 'Judith book'.

Pardew's answer to my telegram came at tea-time. I was afraid that my delightful old lady would be very disappointed. The old ruffian had simply wired, 'Information requested not in our agreement.'

As Harrison was clearing away the tea-things, it occurred to me that, as my romance was now scattered, there was no reason why I should not make a few practical inquiries. They might at least explain the old lady.

'I say, Harrison,' I said. 'Have you heard anything in the village about the people who were here before us? Their name was Coulson.'

'Well, sir, yes, I have,' Harrison said in his most confidential voice. 'It was a case, so I hear, of an unhappy marriage. The lady, sir, as I gather, run away in the end with—with another gentleman. The post-mistress was, if I may say so, very much houted.'

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'Then who was the old lady who lived with them?' I asked.

'I heard nothing about an old lady, sir,' Harrison said, 'though, of course, it might have been a housekeeper. . . .'

'She wasn't a housekeeper,' I said.

And I did not want to believe that it was 'J' who had run away with another 'gentleman'.

V

There are times when I can be a very resolute person. It is not my habit, because I find that being resolute on ordinary occasions is merely a waste of energy. But as I studied the declining moon from my bedroom window at three o'clock the following morning, I decided that this was one of the occasions that demanded resolution.

I had come then to the stage of a passionate desire to know the facts. I was sick of my romantic dreams; I wanted reality, no matter how stark and horrible it might be. I could no longer endure to remain in uncertainty about her I had come to think of as 'Judith'. Two alternatives faced me: either she was dead and it was her spirit I had seen staring in at the window of her old home; or she was a disgraced wife, the mistress of another man. In either case she was for ever lost to me; but I felt that I must know the truth. My mind had been furiously active for the past six hours, with the activity of a squirrel in a cage—tremendous energy and nothing done at the end of it. But after I had faced the decreasing moon, and made my resolve that the old lady should tell me all she knew before she left the house that morning, a sudden calm came over me and

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I went back to bed and slept like a child until Harrison called me.

Fortunately for my peace of mind, the old lady came early. She came, indeed, before I had begun to expect her; for I found her waiting, standing by the open window, when I went into the study immediately after breakfast. She was dressed precisely, to the last detail, as she had been the day before.

She spoke at once, when I entered the room, with a curious certainty of my identity, for she was looking out into the wood and made no movement as she said:

‘Well, have you heard?’

‘Mr. Pardew refuses to give the information,’ I told her.

She put up her hand and leaned it against the window-frame; but the gesture and the sigh that accompanied it were those of one confronted rather by a tedious perplexity than by despair. In fact, I had a strange fancy that there was in them also something very like relief.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ she said.

I saw that the time had come for me to be resolute.

‘There is just one thing that I must ask you to do,’ I said, ‘and that is to give me your confidence. I have no doubt that I can help you, and I will if you’ll tell me the truth. To begin with, if I know your reasons, I can go up to Town and compel Pardew to give me the information you want. He certainly knows it. And then . . .’

She had leaned her forehead against her hand as I began to speak, and as I hesitated she murmured, ‘Yes, and then . . . and then. What comes after?’

‘I may still be able to help you,’ I suggested.

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'Oh! Why should you?' she asked.

'Because—because I am deeply interested and . . . and involved,' I said.

'You!' Her exclamation was mainly one of incredulity, but it held, too, some hint of a question.

'Yes, me,' I persisted firmly, looking away from her. 'I . . . I want to know the truth about . . . about someone who lived here; someone who shared my taste in literature; whose books were all thrust into a cupboard with the blank leaves torn out; whose name, I believe, began with "J". Someone who, as I learnt last night, is reported to have run away from her husband.'

She had both arms raised now, leaning against the window, and her face was completely hidden from me. For a moment she did not speak, and then I heard a murmur of, 'I suppose it's just common curiosity'.

That hurt me. I found myself suddenly filled with something that was almost hatred for the strange, ungainly old woman, with her horrible clothes.

'Nothing of the kind,' I broke out passionately. 'You are too old, I suppose, to remember . . .'

She straightened herself, turned away from me, and going over to the second arm-chair, sat down with her back to the window. But I was not to be interrupted. I followed her into the room and continued incoherently. 'More probably you've never understood. The majority of people never do. This is not a thing of common experience, but I must know if she is dead. I saw her face staring in at me through the window. Was it her spirit, or a figment of my imagination? And oh! I must be sure if it was she, Judith—I know her name is Judith—who read my books? You must tell me that.'

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I stopped abruptly, and it was as if I had dropped a stone down an old mine-shaft and was waiting, interminably, for the sound of its distant crash. For a moment the silence was immense, profound; and then weakly came the faint, almost inaudible response:

'*Your* books!'

'Yes. *You* borrowed *one* last night,' I said, looking at the two books that she had returned and laid on the table before I came into the room.

Another silence followed, far more protracted this time, but no longer charged with that quality of suspense. I had a curious feeling that I was in some queer way—*winning*; that I had, now, only to wait in order to know the whole truth. The old lady was bowed forward with her face in her hand, perfectly motionless, but I was content to await her reply, and quietly sat down opposite to her, without speaking. I think we must have sat like that in absolute silence for two or three minutes.

And when she began to speak, at last, she did not change her position, and she spoke in so low and shaken a voice that I sometimes missed her words.

'You shall know,' she began. 'You have a sort of right. How could I possibly know that it was you who wrote the "*Judith* book"?''

'Was that what *she* called it?' I put in tremulously.

'Yes,' she said. 'Did you, too?'

'Always,' I said in a voice that was as low and shaky as hers. 'But—tell me at once, please. Is she—is she dead?'

'She is not dead, but . . .' the old lady almost whispered.

'But . . .' I interposed anxiously.

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She began softly to rock herself, still keeping her hand over her eyes, as she went on in the same low voice: 'I'll try to tell you. Don't interrupt. You see, she married very young . . . too young . . . and her husband used to drink. She—she thought she could cure him. She brought him here—to cure him. But it seemed so hopeless . . . awful, terrible, but she tried. She did try. It was her idea to get the young doctor to come down. He came several times, and one day he told her that he had got a splendid medical appointment in South Africa and asked her to go with him. She was desperate then—dreadfully desperate, and she said "Yes". She felt she couldn't bear life here any longer; that anything would be better than that; and she said that she'd go. She did go away from here. Everyone thought, her husband thought, that she had really gone to Cape Town with the young doctor. She didn't. She parted from him at Charing Cross and never saw him again. Perhaps she broke his heart. She hardly thought of that. All she could think of in the train, going up to Town, was that she was being false to herself, false to a particular ideal she had always cherished.

'But she couldn't go back to her husband . . . not then. She was afraid of him. He had terrible moods when he was—very bad. So she changed her name and got work in the City. She was an experienced stenographer and typist. Before she was married she used to act as her father's secretary. Her father is . . . Mr. Pardew. But she would not go back to him. She was too proud to confess her failure for one thing, but besides that she . . . she . . . almost from the first meant . . . eventually to try again; to go back to her misery and

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see it through. She had a sort of idea that that would be her only way to happiness. But, she was very weak and her nerves had got all wrong, and she could not bring herself quite to the pitch of facing it. She used to go to Charing Cross quite often, and two or three times she actually took her ticket; and then the thought of this place would come into her mind; and everything would go dark, and she would rush out of the station, frantically, as if the terror were close behind her.

'And then . . . at last . . . she . . .' there was a long pause before she continued: 'she asked *me* to come and find out for her, how things were. She was afraid of the village people, you see, as well as of her husband. They all think that she is a wicked woman. Her father too, of course. Everyone, I suppose . . . except me . . .'

She waited so long that I found courage at last to add, 'And me'.

'Oh! *you!*' she said with a sudden break in her voice.

I could not mistake the emotional quality of that exclamation. It pulled me up on the very brink of plunging once more into a dream of romance. For if Judith were still not free for me to love her, she was a remove nearer than I had thought she would be—at the best. And was she not a thousand times more wonderful than even I had imagined?

But there, on the very verge of hope, I was checked by the unhappiness of this old lady. She was obviously in the deepest distress, and it was my duty to console and help her. The bond already between us was drawn still closer by the fact that she too loved Judith.

'Yes, yes; you must count me in now,' I said eagerly. 'I may never see her again, but there is nothing in the world I wouldn't do for her.'

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The reply startled me. 'Why?' the old lady asked, in a tone from which all the emotion had disappeared—a tone that in a younger woman might have been thought a trifle impudent. And before I could stammer a reply, she continued: 'I mean you've never seen her. She may not be a bit what you think. Suppose she turns out to be one of those plump, pale, pasty young women with spectacles and good intentions? Will you still be so ready to help her?'

'You forget that I *have* seen her—once,' I said.

'You thought you did,' was the answer.

'I have material evidence,' I said coldly. 'There was the likeness to the photograph.'

'What photograph?' the old lady asked in a startled voice.

I got up, took the photograph out of the drawer, and gave it to her.

'Oh! yes!' she said, glancing at it carelessly. 'That's my aunt; my father's elder sister. I was supposed . . .'

I do not believe that she meant to tell me, then. She had been expecting to see a photograph of herself, and in her relief at escaping that danger, she had been taken off her guard.

As for me, the world went black for a moment, and when I recovered, my first feeling was one of intense shame. I had seen her twice, talked with her, heard her exquisite voice, and yet been so grossly stupid, so incredibly blind, that I had never penetrated her disguise. I leaned against the table and waited for her scorn. How could I ever persuade her, now, that my love was not a figment of my own imagination?

'I mean . . .' she began, breaking the dreadful silence

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that had fallen upon us, and speaking rather unsteadily. 'I mean, of course . . .'

'Don't,' I implored her.

Again silence fell upon us, to be broken by a little tremulous voice saying, 'I never meant you to guess.'

Not a hint of blaming me for not having recognised her!

'I ought to have known from the beginning,' I exclaimed. 'I ought to have known from the first instant.'

'But I didn't know, either,' she said, humbly.

'That was utterly different,' I expostulated.

'It wasn't,' she said.

'But do you mean . . . ?'

'Yes! In a way. Ever since the Judith book,' she said.

At that I lost my self-control. 'Oh! take off those horrible things,' I implored. 'At least, let me see you.'

She hesitated for one moment, then stood up, with a touch of recklessness, and began to strip off her disguise.

So it was that I saw her the second time, not with amazing unexpectedness, but gradually; revealed to me by exquisite degrees. Her veil came away first, and I saw her dear mouth; her spectacles, and I knew her lovely eyes; her bonnet and white wig together, to reveal the marvel of her soft dark hair; and at last the padded, disguising mantle; and the Judith of my dreams was shown to me—Judith, my Judith, down to the waist. Below that the long, coarse skirt hid her from me.

'That's all I can do,' she said with a faint blush.

All! I was drowned in love.

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We stood looking into each other's eyes for a few eternal seconds, silently acknowledging our love, then she turned away and said, 'Will you help me to find him?'

'No, no, I can't do that,' I protested, 'anything but that.'

'There is nothing else but that for me or you to do,' she said. 'It may not be for long. I shall be his nurse, that's all; but I must try once more to save him. Only by doing that can I fulfil my ideal—or yours.'

She came a little closer, then, so that I gripped my hands together behind my back for fear I might be tempted to touch her. 'Oh! you do agree, don't you?' she said, and there were tears in her dear eyes. 'It's the only thing we can do, if our . . . if we are to be worthy of one another. Say, please say that you agree.'

I dared not speak, but I nodded my head.

'You will go and see my father and get that address.' Again I nodded.

'Will you go now?' she said. 'I—I can't bear it if you don't go now. And you must write to me at the inn or send a message—I'm known there as Mrs. Richards—just to give me the address and say that my father knows the truth about me. I want, now, that the first advance should come from him. I still feel that I couldn't explain it all to him as I did to you. He did all he could, you see, to prevent my marrying Henry. And he was so right.'

I smiled wanly at the prettiness of her feminine reason, but my smile soon faded. 'You don't mean,' I said in dismay, 'that I'm not to see you again—to say good-bye.'

She hesitated, and then, 'Very well,' she said,

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'we do deserve just that, don't we? Will you please go now?'

I went.

VI

Old Pardew looked at me over his glasses and scowled when I was shown into his room.

'My good sir,' he began. 'You had my telegram...'

'Hush!' I said. I was in my resolute mood again. 'I've brought you some news.'

He had to listen.

When I had finished he sighed deeply, took off his spectacles and rubbed his tired eyes. 'Then she has never seen my advertisement,' was his only comment.

'I don't know. I never mentioned it,' I told him.

'If she had, she would have known that I'd forgiven her,' he said. 'I felt sure she'd know.'

'She can't have seen it,' I reassured him, 'or she would certainly have told me. But now, will you give me that address?'

He put on his spectacles again and stared at me fiercely. 'Do you want her to go back to that scoundrel?' he asked.

'She says she must,' I said.

He dropped his head in his hands. 'When she says that,' he remarked, 'that's the end of it.'

I wished that he would be quick and let me go. My mind was busy with the thought of that poisonous service of trains on the branch line. Then, 'Trains be damned!' I said to myself, 'I'll hire a car, a big car, the fastest car I can get. I'll be back in two hours; an hour and a half—perhaps even a little less than that.'

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My impatience grew at the thought of the endless time it would take me to get back.

‘Oh! the address, Pardew,’ I burst out suddenly. ‘What’s the address?’

He raised his head and looked at me with a grim smile.

‘I’ll give you two guesses,’ he said. ‘He drank himself to death, six months ago.’

ILLUSION



‘**H**ELMA is giving a supper party on the stage after her farewell show at the Pandemonium to-night. She says you must come. I expect it will be no end of a rag . . .’

Stanley decided that he would go. A good rag might dispel the horrible depression of mind that seemed to be dragging him lower day by day.

He was losing his sense of reality. Yesterday, as he had been standing at his window, watching the eternal succession of street-musicians whose method of appeal ranged from a brass band to the single unaccompanied voice, he had had a queer illusion that it was he who was playing in the gutter and they who watched. And the day before that, when he had been brushed by the skirts of the great march of the unemployed, he had been aware of a strong impulse to fall in and march with them. At the moment the thought of that descent had presented itself as a pathway to reality. He would be able to step down into life, to become an active cell in the great suffering body of humanity. . . .

He might even have yielded to the temptation, if at that moment Sir William Powell had not clapped him on the shoulder, and drawn his attention to the admirable effectiveness of the procession as an advertising campaign. ‘Wish I could get as good a one for my shops,’ Powell had said.

Stanley had seen then that the straggling line of lean

ILLUSION

men and women stretching out of sight in either direction, was not a reality; but was made up of shadows like himself taking part in a meaningless spectacle.

'It would be awful, if they came to life,' he had said; and Powell, after staring at him for a moment, had laughed rather cynically.

'They haven't got the guts, my boy,' he had said. 'There's no fear of that.'

It was fortunate that Powell had turned up when he did. Stanley realised while they were talking that he had been on the verge of bursting into tears.

Perhaps this rag of Helma's at the Pandemonium would put him right again? For once, he would absolutely 'let himself go'.

* * *

The curtain was up, but the house was lighted only by reflections splashed from the brilliance of the stage. Here and there from the sweep of the three towering 'circles', a little constellation of weak stars stole out from the bosses and angles of the gilding, and faintly lit the more prominent contours of the vast, attentive auditorium. But under the galleries, the starlight died into the ultimate blackness of empty space, of the deep illimitable darkness beyond the final universe.

Stanley, half-blinded by the glare of the footlights, found his attention continually drawn back to those enormous openings out of reality, and had to snatch himself back by an effort from the thought of exploring them. He had already drunk too much champagne; and when he gazed into that profound darkness, a horrible giddiness began to seize him. It was as if something within him terrifyingly threatened to escape.

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Whenever that sickening, devastating thing happened, he turned for relief to the magnificent actuality of Helma.

She was still wearing the jutting, almost impalpable skirts of the ballerina from which her exquisite legs fell like the pistils of a flower. Her eyelashes and eyebrows were clogged and stiff with cosmetics; the hollows of her eyes were darkened, and the rich bow of her lips was like a lovely scarlet wound in the artificial whiteness of her painted face.

And in sheer delight she had covered herself with jewels. With every movement, her fingers flashed a rainbow brilliance, her neck and bosom were almost concealed beneath a multitude of pearls, rubies and emeralds; and in her hair the famous opal crown burned with a million points of creeping fire.

Stanley turned back once more from the sickening vortex of the outer darkness to watch her as she leapt upon the seat of her throne, a bottle of champagne in one hand and a wonderful Venetian goblet in the other.

The bottle, newly-opened, was slowly frothing out its precious contents, and she held that and the goblet at arm's length as she made her speech.

'My very dear friends,' she said, poising herself on the tips of her toes, 'let us, before all things, be expensive. Am I not one of the most expensive things in the world? Our dear friend, Stanley, has just told me that I am the symbol of waste and extravagance. He paid me a great compliment. To be extravagant without afterthought is to be free, to live. To have one care for the future is to be a slave. I give you a toast. Ladies and gentlemen, we will drink to freedom!'

She poured a little champagne into the Venetian

ILLUSION

goblet, and having drunk the toast, flung the glass behind her. Then seeing that Lord Henry Merton, who was on her right, had fallen forward over the table instead of rising with the rest of the party, she sought to revive him by pouring the remainder of the champagne over his head and shoulders.

Stanley was forced to sit down again while the others still noisily honoured Helma's toast. He was too sick and giddy to stand, and the reality he sought was slipping from him. Even the figure of Helma, poised now with widespread arms and empty hands, seemed to be no more than a beautiful symbol of extravagance.

His eyes ached with the glare, and he dared not close them, for when he did that, an awful nausea seized him. In desperation he turned back to the three great rings of soft alluring darkness that offered escape into the void. Why, after all, should he hesitate? He would gaze without fear, and when the terrible pangs of release were over he would find peace.

But the rings were no longer void. Little pale circles were visible now against the background, faint reflecting surfaces that increased steadily in number, massing rank by rank, tier above tier, until the whole house was filled.

And suddenly his mind cleared. The great auditorium no longer swam dizzily before him. He saw it clearly and distinctly packed with grey human faces, immensely still, attentive to the mad riot of the stage.

They had forced the doors and come in silently to watch. And in imagination he could see, beyond the theatre, the endless procession patiently waiting in the cold, dark streets, tailing away mile after mile into

THE MEETING PLACE

invisibility; a million shadows gently pressing forward to enter the light and warmth of the Pandemonium.

Then fear seized him. Springing to his feet, he powerfully thrust the table from him so that it fell with a crash of glass and silver.

On the stage everyone was lost in a riot of dancing. Men and women shouted and sang, insanely spinning about each other, laughing and embracing; while Helma, alone, poised on her toes, deftly threaded the reeling maze, flitting with exquisite certainty here and there, light and graceful as some miraculous flower endowed with an amazing gift of effortless movement.

'I say, I say. Look out,' Stanley shouted with all the strength of his lungs.

No one regarded him. The dance seemed to be whirling to a climax, and the roar and scream of fifty voices rose, terrifyingly, higher and higher.

He dared not look behind him, but he knew that the great banks of pale attentive faces were pressing ever closer and closer towards the light. At any moment, now, the awful thing might happen. They might come to life and then they would reach up over the stage like a great grey wave, and there would be an end of himself and Helma and all the rioters for ever.

'Oh! Look out! Look out!' he screamed. 'They're coming to life. They are coming to life!'

The dance whirled on towards its furious climax, closing more nearly about the figure of Helma, slowly spinning upon her toes.

Among the wreckage of food and broken glasses Lord Henry lay upon the floor, apparently wrapped in a profound and grateful sleep.

THE INDOMITABLE MRS. GARTHORNE



IT was one of those still bright days in early February, on which the warmth of the southern sun charms one with the illusion that Spring is already come hot-foot across the Spanish border; and I, who prefer illusion to fact, was watching the play of the swell that rolled in now and again from the Atlantic, when I was so unexpectedly summoned to play my small part in a drama that was to affect four lives so profoundly, to say nothing of my own.

The introduction was commonplace enough. I had arrived in Biarritz the previous afternoon only; and although I knew perhaps a score of the English and American visitors who were spending the Season there, I was not aware that young Hugh Garthorne and his mother were among the number, until he suddenly invaded my high retreat on the island-rock, near the complicated little harbour of the fishermen.

I heard the sound of someone mounting with an evident hesitation the twisting flight of steps that gives access to the little railed plateau on the summit of the rock, and turned my head to see Hugh slowly coming into view, rather as if (even then the metaphor occurred to me) he were rising to join me on the stage by means of a badly-worked 'trap'.

I can't pretend that I was glad to see him. Apart from the fact that I was in a mood to dream rather than to talk, I was not greatly drawn to young Garthorne.

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He was spoilt by his mother who, though she certainly spoilt no one else, permitted, even encouraged, this only child of hers to lounge through life with no occupation save that afforded by playing games and dressing himself. Judging from his appearance, he must have spent a considerable time every day in dressing himself. A great pity, I thought, for he was a handsome, intelligent-looking youngster.

He gave no sign of surprise at seeing me alone there. 'Hallo! Edwardes!' he said, casually. And 'Hallo! Garthorne,' I replied, adding as he came and sat down beside me, the inevitable, 'I didn't know that you were in Biarritz.'

'Been here for five weeks,' he said.

'Oh! Have you?' I returned, mentally cursing the necessity for politeness. Why should I sit here exchanging inanities with the spoilt child of a rich widow whom I disliked, when I might be indulging my fancy with enticing dreams? It was so good, so stimulating, to be back again by the open sea; to be able to watch on this day of calm sunshine, the occasional roller coming from across the world, heave magnificently against the rocks in front of us, split, break into foam, and then in sudden petulance dash at the base of the island, hissing and chattering.

'Do all the big things in life get broken up like that?' Hugh remarked unexpectedly, glancing at me with a faint blush.

I was startled. I had been anticipating some gossip of the last tennis tournament, of where the best jazz-band was to be found for a *thé-dansant*; some fritter of that kind. But now that I looked at him more closely, I thought I could see signs of a new seriousness in his face.

'The wave at least dies in splendour,' I said.

'There's that, of course,' he replied, watching the sea and slightly shrugging his shoulders before he continued after a moment's pause. 'I saw you come up here. I followed you, on purpose. You see you're different from the other people in our set . . . being a poet and so on . . . I got a feeling you might understand.'

That speech warmed me towards him. I was flattered by his description of me—even with the doubtful qualification of his 'and so on'—for, indeed, I am not known to the world at large as a poet.

'Understand what?' I asked gently.

I have said that the introduction to my drama was commonplace enough, and I saw no probability of its ever developing on other than purely conventional lines when with the freedom from self-consciousness that came in his case from being the petted and adored son of his rich mother, he confessed to having fallen in love with a young violinist who played at the Casino. The whole thing was, it seemed to me, so trite, so hackneyed—so precisely what one might have anticipated.

'What does your mother say?' I asked. 'She has always given you everything you wanted; won't she give you this?'

'I haven't dared to say anything to her about it,' he said.

I raised my eyebrows. 'But I thought . . .' I began.

'She wants me to marry Lady Rose Whitley,' he interrupted me. 'Some people imagine that we're engaged, already. She'll be my partner in the Mixed Doubles next week. I like her too. Nice kid. But it isn't only that. You don't know my mother well, do you?'

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I did not. I had never wished to. I had always heard her spoken of as a hard, self-seeking, intolerant woman; and that report of her had been confirmed by my own observations. She was, I believed, a woman with but one weakness; the boy to whom I was now speaking.

'No; I don't know her at all well,' I admitted.

'Then the thing you don't know about her,' he explained, 'is that she's a bit crazy on this subject. I don't know why. She's sensible enough about everything else. But the only real row we've ever had was about something of this sort, when I was at Balliol. I was a young ass, of course; and I saw afterwards that she'd been perfectly right on that occasion. But—well—she gave me a sort of scare. First time she'd ever gone on at *me* like that, you know—told me then that if ever I married without her consent, she'd disown me, you understand.' He paused and grinned at me cheerfully as he concluded: 'And considering that I haven't got a bean of my own and no profession, that might be dashed awkward.'

'It certainly might,' I agreed. His frank confession, however trite, had warmed my heart towards him.

'You don't mind my telling you all this,' he half-apologised. 'Fact is, I wondered if you'd feel like helping me?'

'Helping you?' I temporised, my mind suddenly full of romantic, cinematographic pictures of waiting motor-cars, frenzied escapes, and sentimental reconciliations; with myself, modestly in the background, performing some unobtrusive miracle.

'I wondered if you'd talk to my mother about it?' he said.

THE INDOMITABLE MRS. GARTHORNE

But no; that was more than I felt prepared to do. Mrs. Garthorne was the kind of woman that I have always been afraid of; tall, handsome, commanding, with a kind of solidity both of the flesh and the mental outlook that greatly intimidates me. I would have been ready to commit some not too desperate offence against the law in order to help Hugh; but I could not face his mother, on such an errand.

'My dear chap, what would be the use of that?' I said. 'I shouldn't have the least influence with her.'

'Tell you what,' he replied; 'come and see her this afternoon. She's playing at the Casino.'

'Your mother's playing . . .!' I stammered.

'Good Lord!' he ejaculated with another grin. 'My hat; no. Come and see Her.'

It was probably relief at the relative simplicity of this so suddenly substituted alternative, that made me agree to his proposal without demur. But even as I did so, I had an uneasy feeling that I was letting myself in for something that I should do much better to avoid. This new Hugh Garthorne whom I saw for the first time on the little island rock at Biarritz, was, I felt, going to be uncommonly difficult to influence. He had the look of a man who has definitely made up his mind; he had something of his mother's air of resolution.

'Though I don't quite understand why you should imagine that *I* can help you?' I added feebly.

'Well, you know all about psychology and that sort of thing,' was the only explanation I had from him.

* * *

When I saw the name of the girl on the programme, the feeling that this affair of Hugh's was, after all,

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essentially common-place and uninteresting returned to me with new force. The name given was 'Paula Gonzalez'; an obvious and clumsy pseudonym, I decided; and was instantly prepared for a figure to match it—a young woman with a striking profile, handsome, common and loud.

Hugh, sitting beside me, nudged my elbow. 'That's her father,' he whispered. 'Just come into the orchestra. With the violin. The chap with white hair.'

The man he indicated was still standing, with as it seemed to me, an effect of hesitation. Despite the absolute whiteness of his thick hair, his eyebrows were dark and his moustache and neat pointed beard only slightly tinged with grey, I guessed him to be still on the sunny side of sixty. As I watched him, he shot one quick glance at Hugh, and then sat down, turning his back on us.

'He knows about you then?' I murmured to Hugh.

'He has probably guessed,' he returned.

'Is he likely to be—difficult?' I asked.

'Can't say yet,' was the answer. 'You see, I've never spoken to either of 'em.'

'But how could he guess in that case?' I protested.

'Spotted me, I expect,' Hugh said. 'I'm always here when she plays. Besides which I generally wait about to see them come out.'

With that, although there may appear to have been little cause for my change of attitude, the sense of being drawn into a hackneyed, common intrigue, definitely left me. It may have been due to this evidence of restraint on Hugh's part, or it may have been the effect that that glimpse of the white-haired first-violin had

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had upon me. I could not understand that look he had thrown at Hugh. Reflecting on the man's hesitation, the way in which he had stood with a half-abstracted, half-attentive air before he had, as it were, dared that one brief glance, it came to me that the action had been timorously planned. I wondered if the man were one of those reserved self-conscious people who never outgrow a childish dread of appearing conspicuous.

I was certainly becoming intrigued by Hugh's love-affair even before I saw the object of his adoration. She was below the average height and looked smaller perched up alone there on the platform; a rather pathetic childish figure, with a child's mouth set, at the moment, in a mould of intent determination that did not break into a smile when she bowed to her audience. She was undoubtedly pretty, but I hardly remarked that, being drawn from the first moment by her air of intelligence combined with that effect of girlish seriousness; as if she would attack and conquer her world by sheer endeavour. She was dark enough to carry off her Spanish name, but she was not a Spanish type; she was altogether too reserved and too tender.

I admired her at once, and when she played I fell in love with her in my paternal, middle-aged way—deep enough to feel that the Hugh Garthorne I had known was not worthy of her. She looked so sweet and yet so vital as she played to us, so eager and so intent to give us her very best. But though her best was very good for a child of nineteen, full of fire and feeling, I knew that she would never make a first-class violinist. She had worked hard, I guessed; but she was not a born musician. Of course, all her pieces were encored.

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There was not a man in the audience, and only a few women, who would not have rewarded her so evident wish to please them.

As she came to the end of her last encore, I became aware that Hugh was trembling as if he were shaking with cold, an impossible contingency in that overheated concert-room. I turned towards him, wondering if he had been deeply stirred by the music, and saw that his eyes were fixed upon that delightful child on the stage with a gaze that expressed at once anticipation and the keenest anxiety; the look of a man who expects some greatly longed-for sign, but is tremulously afraid that it may be denied him. A little startled, I turned my attention back to Paula Gonzalez. She had finished playing and was bowing her acknowledgments of the enthusiastic applause, smiling gratefully as if she loved us all for our kindness to her. And then, just as the white-haired man in the orchestra had done, and with the same effect of nervous resolution, she gave one quick, but unmistakable glance at Hugh before she made her exit. She did not smile as she did it. It seemed rather as if she were conscious of taking a liberty.

'You were expecting her to look at you,' I said to him as soon as we were outside.

'She did it yesterday,' he admitted.

'But you've never attempted to speak to her or her father!' I commented.

'Look here, Edwardes!' he exclaimed, taking me by the arm. 'I've told you about this because you're the only chap I know who I thought might understand. Anyway, I don't know anyone else who'd be likely to. I couldn't say much to you this morning, but now

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you've seen her it's different. Surely you understand now?"

I did, up to a point. I was beginning to understand, for instance, that the Hugh Garthorne I had known hitherto, was not the real man, and that I had a distinct feeling of liking for the new one who was now being revealed to me.

'I can quite understand your being in love with her,' I said. 'She's adorable.'

He gave a little sigh, perhaps at the hopelessness of expressing her quality in mere language, before he replied. 'Well, then, don't you see how impossible it would be to try and scrape up an acquaintance in the usual way; the usual caddish way? I couldn't. She's—well, you've seen her now, so you ought to know. That's why I want you to come and talk to my mother. I want her to invite them to our house. It's the only way I've been able to think of—of getting to know them, decently.'

We had come down to the plage and he was facing the wind that was coming up fitfully out of the great distances of the open Atlantic, and already tossing the crests of the increasing rollers into a spume of white spray. There was, I thought, something almost heroic in the calm certainty of his expression, just then.

'We're going to have a storm,' I said.

'The sooner the better,' he replied unexpectedly. 'But, look here, will you try first if you can do anything with my mother?'

'I'll try,' I said. I could not deny him that, though I knew it was hopeless. 'And if I don't succeed?' I added.

'She'll have to disown me,' he returned quietly. 'I

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expect I'll be able to earn a living somehow. And, anyway, it would prove what I was willing to do for Her.'

And that was how I came to have an interview with that terrible, intimidating woman, his mother.

* * *

I went the next afternoon while Hugh was at the Casino.

Mrs. Garthorne received me politely enough. There was no reason why she should not do so; she had nothing against me; but the consciousness of my mission made me feel more uncomfortable than usual in her presence. She was so essentially a woman *rangée*. She had long since finally made up her mind on every conceivable question of society, politics and religion. She would not have taken the advice of an Archbishop if it had not suited her own views; and what chance had I when I proposed to attack what I had gathered to be the most cherished of all her fixed opinions?

The apparent effect of my foolish embassy was not, however, quite what I had anticipated. I began, tactfully, by talking of Hugh, a subject to which she was always attentive, and presently ventured the suggestion that his character had developed considerably since we had last met.

She was pouring out the tea and paused at that with the tea-pot still poised in her hand.

'You find him more serious?' she asked shrewdly.

'I do, yes; and more . . .' I twiddled my fingers, searching for a word; 'more thoughtful,' I concluded weakly.

She put down the tea-pot and passed me my cup, holding my gaze the while with a resolute stare that

THE INDOMITABLE MRS. GARTHORNE made me tremble. 'You know that he's in love?' she asked.

I had forgotten about Rose Whitley; and thought that she had already got wind of the affair and that the game was up. The fact gave me courage. 'Most beautifully, even heroically in love,' I said. 'It will be the making of him.'

'Ah!' she commented quietly. I had never seen her look more solid.

'He's inspired,' I continued; 'and, I feel, worthily.'

'You've seen her?' she put in.

'Yesterday afternoon; at the Casino de la Plage,' I admitted.

'Ah!' she commented again with that effect of immense resolution. 'And her name?'

I hesitated. I was ashamed of the poor little tinsel name, so suggestive of yellow skirts, black lace and castanets, that suited so ill that earnest child with the violin. 'Paula Gonzalez,' I said.

'I'm greatly obliged to you, Mr. Edwardes,' she returned, and immediately began to talk—not about Hugh or his entanglement; but about Biarritz society and its doings; a steady stream of hard, fluent conversation that gave me no chance to do more than interpolate a brief monosyllable. She talked me out of my chair and out of the house. I do not believe that anything short of physical violence would have stopped her. And though she said nothing impolite, I received very clearly the impression that I need not call on her again.

I met Hugh by appointment at the Miramont. It was a day of rain and blustering wind and the plague was impossible.

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'So you've done it?' he remarked as I sat down by him.

I explained that what I had done was to give him away and nothing more.

'Good,' he replied; surprisingly, I thought.

'But my dear chap,' I began.

'That's all right,' he interrupted me. 'It's exactly what I wanted. Cursed odd, I admit, but you know I just hadn't got the courage to *break* it to her. That was where I stuck, somehow. I've given her a hint or two, but she pretended not to notice. Now she knows, I don't care a damn. No end obliged to you, old top.'

'But what are you going to do?' I asked.

'Split,' he said quietly. 'Make a clean break away. What else could I do?'

I felt bound to remonstrate with him. 'That's all very well, my dear old chap,' I said; 'but you owe a lot to your mother. She may be a bit queer on this subject of your marriage, but she's utterly devoted to you; given you everything you asked for, simply lived for you. Even if she were not your mother—common gratitude, I mean—what?'

He was more impressed by that than I had expected. 'Yes, you're right,' he admitted. 'Besides . . .'

'How are you going to live?' I concluded for him.

'Oh! It isn't that,' he replied contemptuously. 'I'd make a living somehow. Scene-shifting or something. I've faced that idea. That's nothing. What I was going to say was that it was just funking to run away. Paula's so tremendously worth winning isn't she? Worth the very greatest thing I could possibly do.'

'Which is?' I enquired, puzzled.

'Face it out,' he said. 'Make my mother give in. Go on living with her, and back my will against hers.'

'By heaven!' I exclaimed. 'That would be magnificent.'

'I'll do it,' he announced; and for a moment he looked capable of anything. Then he frowned, sighed and slightly pushed his chair away from the table. 'Only,' he said, 'you must come back with me—just to start with. I know it looks like weakness; but, you see, I've got to snap the chain, if you know what I mean. My mother has dominated me all these years, and I've got the habit of giving in to her. But if I could once break that habit, I could go on. I'm perfectly certain I could go on. And if you're there, I shall *have* to do it.'

I felt at the moment, as if I would sooner parade Biarritz in pyjamas than face Mrs. Garthorne again so soon; but I understood exactly how he felt about the great preliminary effort needed to 'snap the chain' of habit; and agreed to lend him my support, assuming, I hope, such an appearance of careless courage as would be most likely to stiffen his own.

'Very well. Come on,' I said, getting to my feet. 'We'll go at once.'

So far as I was concerned, that, I knew, was the only chance. I should never do it if I had time to think.

* * *

Mrs. Garthorne was in the same room and the same chair in which I had left her barely an hour earlier. She turned her head when we came in, but gave us no other greeting. She was fully prepared for what we had to say, and was perfectly confident of utterly

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routing us, but like the great general that she was, she took no risks: her first piece of strategy being to lay all the burden of the attack upon us. She intended to give no sign until we had revealed our tactics and discovered our artillery, such as it was.

I looked at Hugh and realised that it was for me to open the battle. He was gazing abstractedly out of the window, apparently lost in some mental calculation; but whether he was already funkng the engagement or not, I couldn't guess. In any case, I had to offer myself up as a forlorn hope to tempt the enemy out of cover.

I did not, I confess, display either great courage or remarkable intelligence in my opening; but I have an incurable habit of politeness. If Hugh's life instead of only his happiness had depended upon the issue, I do not think I could have been rude to Mrs. Garthorne, at that moment.

'I must apologise for returning so soon,' I said. 'But I met Hugh in the town, and realising what a very poor hand I had made of my ambassadorship earlier I felt that I must ask you to let me tell you, what I really had no opportunity of telling you this afternoon. . . .'

I could have gone on from that if she had permitted me, worked myself up, perhaps, into an appeal by the practice of my own eloquence, but she cut me short. The sound she made is usually written 'Faugh!' but nothing can express the insolence and contempt she put into it. I was utterly rejected and dismissed. Never in my life have I felt so abominably insulted.

Nevertheless it seemed that I had served some purpose in thus drawing the enemy's guns, if the forlorn hope itself had been completely annihilated by that

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single discharge. Hugh had had time to find his method, time enough to screw up his courage to the sticking-point. After all, what he had chiefly required of me was my witness.

'I came to tell you that I'm going to marry Miss Paula Gonzalez, mother, if she'll have me,' he said, still with his gaze on some ultra-terrestrial vision—possibly the imagined features of his ideal.

Mrs. Garthorne remained perfectly still, perfectly contemptuous. A faint snort was her only audible reply.

'And,' Hugh continued with a faint smile, 'and, with your full consent.'

That seemed to be a good shot.

He had, at least, succeeded in surprising her. She looked at him sharply as if it had crossed her mind that he might possibly have some card up his sleeve. Indeed, I thought I caught a hint of something in her expression that looked rather like alarm.

'Hugh!' she apostrophised him, sharply, 'Don't be absurd.'

'I mean to get my own way, this time, you see,' he said.

Her fear—if I had been correct in my diagnosis—was evidently relieved by his answer. She got to her feet, looking bigger and more impressive than ever in her cold wrath.

'You'd better go to your room, Hugh,' she pronounced majestically. 'And never let me hear another word from you on this subject.'

It was the method of the autocrat, of the governess with the small child, by which she had always ruled him. In reverting to it, she played on his familiar

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reactions; re-stimulated the sensations of the helpless boy who had always been dependent upon her.

And I knew that if Hugh submitted now, he would be beaten. It was here that he had either to snap that chain of habit which had bound him for more than twenty years, or submit for ever to his mother's imperious will. I looked at him expecting to see the signs of the coming defeat, a bent head, a nervous movement of the hands; but his head was raised, his hands were loosely clasped behind his back and he was smiling.

'In future you will hear from me on this subject, mother, whenever we meet,' he said steadily. 'I shall talk of nothing else.'

She looked straight into his eyes and he returned her gaze with equal steadiness.

I left them there still locked in that grip. I had played my part. Hugh had taken his line—the only right line, I believed—and no one could help him, now. But what the end of it would be, I could not guess. Somehow, I could not imagine Mrs. Garthorne giving in.

* * *

I did not see Hugh again for three days, and then we met, by accident, in the Place, about four o'clock. He took me by the arm. 'Good, I wanted to see you,' he said. 'There's something I want you to do for me.'

I shuddered with a horrible premonition that I was to be called upon for yet another interview with his mother. A dozen excuses rose to my mind, but there was a new force and resolution about Hugh's voice and manner that checked them from finding utterance.

'Oh! What's that?' I asked.

'I want you to make the acquaintance of Mr. Gonzalez and Paula,' he said. 'I can't yet. I've told her that I won't see them again until I've got her consent to bring them to the house. But I should like you to get in touch with them. You can't give 'em any messages from me, of course; but you might sort of interest 'em in me, what?'

I agreed, almost with enthusiasm, so relieved was I.

'And how goes the battle royal?' I asked.

'Pretty stiff,' he said. 'But I'm getting into training. I started with an infernal handicap, you know; but I'm picking up, now. All this'll be splendid practice in keeping a stiff upper lip and that sort of thing, if it comes to the scene-shifting after all.'

Who would ever have thought that the boy had such fine stuff in him, I reflected, as I waited by the artists' entrance to the Casino. I felt a sudden warm confidence in him—not in his chances of winning that fearful contest of wills with his mother; I believed her to be indomitable—but in the certainty that he would eventually make good. I could help him to a better start in life than a job as a scene-shifter would give him, and I was fully prepared to do it. Not alone for the sake of Hugh and that appealing little violinist, although they came first. No, let me be honest and admit that Mrs. Garthorne's contemptuous 'Faugh!' still rankled in my mind. I could never forgive her for that.

I found no difficulty in making the acquaintance of Gonzalez and Paula; indeed they seemed to be expecting me. More than that, when they had accepted my invitation to tea and we had settled ourselves into a

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corner of the inner room at the Miramont, they made it very easy for me to introduce the subject I had been charged to interest them in.

At the first casual mention of 'a young friend of mine who had greatly admired Miss Gonzalez's playing', they exchanged a quick glance of understanding, and then Gonzalez, with a very obvious embarrassment of manner said:

'Are you speaking of the young friend who was with you in the theatre three days ago? I—I noticed him.'

'We have seen him there every day, almost,' Paula put in, 'until last Tuesday, that is, when he was there with you. He hasn't been since.'

'Yes, that is the one I mean,' I said. 'His name is Garthorne, Hugh Garthorne.'

Gonzalez bent over his plate to hide his face; but the clear eyes of Paula were shining as she watched him; shining, I thought, a little triumphantly, almost as if they were saying, 'I told you so'.

I had but one explanation of their behaviour and it repelled me. I imagined that, as so often before, I had been deceived in my judgment; that they were, in fact, no more than just two poverty-stricken musicians, eager to entrap the wealthy young man who had, by his behaviour, already proclaimed himself to be this outwardly charming young girl's admirer. Poor Hugh, I reflected, was it for such a tinsel prize as this that he had engaged in that tremendous conflict of wills with his indomitable mother? Yet it was not for me to oppose his desire. The one adversary he had would be quite sufficient. If she could not deter him, it was very certain that I could not.

'He would so much like to meet you', I continued,

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'a little later on. For the moment he is—er—very much occupied.'

To my surprise Gonzalez shook his head. 'Oh! no; no. That would never do,' he said.

'I don't see, dear, really, why not?' Paula remonstrated. 'Just once, you know.'

Had they guessed my suspicion of them, I wondered, and were they now trying to disguise their trap by a piece of shoddy play-acting? It looked like that. And Gonzalez's next question confirmed my original inference.

'His mother, I suppose, is very rich?' he asked shyly.

'I presume so,' I said.

'A widow?' he mumbled—still without raising his head.

'For more than twenty years,' I told him. 'Hugh was, I believe, a posthumous child.'

Gonzalez raised his eyes, then, not to look at me, but to exchange another of those understanding glances with Paula, whose regard of him this time appeared to be no longer triumphant but tender, consolatory. Then as if to distract my attention from Gonzalez, she turned to me, with one of her pathetic, appealing little smiles, and said: 'Me, too, you see'.

I did not understand, and in reply to my look of blank astonishment she explained:

'I'm an orphan, really. My father died a few weeks before I was born, and my mother a few weeks after. If daddy hadn't adopted me, I should have died too, of course.'

An obvious question suggested itself. 'You are married?' I asked Gonzalez.

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He hesitated a moment, and then said, 'Yes; but I have not seen my wife for more than twenty years.'

'And where were you when you adopted Miss Paula?' I enquired.

'The Argentine,' he replied, 'Buenos Ayres. Paula's father was an English engineer. He died of yellow fever. . . .'

A pathetic little history of struggle and self-sacrifice it appeared to me, thinking it all over after I had left them, and guessing at much that they had not told me. And reflecting upon it that evening, I suffered another reaction; I blamed myself for having attributed such grossly mercenary motives to them. Yet I was mightily puzzled to explain otherwise their obvious interest in Hugh; puzzled and presently so piqued, that I determined to talk to Gonzalez again at the earliest opportunity.

It presented itself no later than the next morning, when I found him, by chance, on that other island rock connected to the mainland by a bridge, known as the Rocher de la Vierge. He was at the furthest point where the nose of the spit dips into deep water, but the tide was half out, the sea fairly calm, and there was little danger of being drenched by the spray of a sudden swell.

He greeted me with a shy eagerness, at once glad to see me, I thought, and a little afraid; as if he braced himself to some intimidating task. 'I—I would like to ask you rather a queer question, Mr. Edwardes,' he began immediately, with a nervous rush that made me think of my own futile attack upon Mrs. Garthorne.

I tried to put him at his ease. 'By all means,' I said, smiling. 'If I can help you in any way, I shall be

THE INDOMITABLE MRS. GARTHORNE delighted. I am, I assure you, greatly interested in your charming adopted daughter.'

He leaned on the low stone parapet that guards the end of the rock, and stared out across the magnificent breadth of the great Atlantic, that even in its sunniest hours, hardly conceals the menace of its destructive strength. 'It's just this, sir,' he murmured; 'can I trust you with a secret? trust you, that's to say, not to mention it to—to any of the people concerned?'

'You can,' I returned quietly.

'It concerns your young friend, Mr. Hugh Garthorne,' he continued with a little catch in his breath. 'You see—you see—although he must never know it—I'm his father.'

I may be forgiven for not believing him. His announcement seemed so utterly unlikely. I did not suspect him of any criminal tendency towards black-mail; I merely supposed that his mind was a trifle weak, and that he was probably subject to harmless illusions of this kind.

'Really! That's very interesting,' I humoured him.

'And if I could just meet him once without his having any suspicion who I am,' he continued, with a deep sigh, still staring out across the sea, 'it would be something to remember. I would be very careful,' he turned to me with a sudden appeal in his face. 'Oh, I would not for anything interfere with his happiness.'

If this were acting, it was of the very finest quality; nevertheless, it was not his expression and the tones of his voice that convinced me; but the likeness to Hugh I had unexpectedly seen when the little man had gazed out at some illusory vision across the world, just as his

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son had gazed from his mother's window four days earlier.

'Do you know,' I said, 'I think I can help you to more than that, but couldn't you tell me something of your story first?'

A sordid little story enough, it may appear, set out in dull words, but to me it was quick with the breath of life, inspired by my sight of this sensitive little artist and my realisation of what his sufferings must have been during the mercifully short year and a half of his married life. For, to me, there was something heroic in the fact that he had dared the law for the sake of the child that was coming; had committed a terrible indiscretion with the paper of the firm by which he had been employed and had suffered the full penalty of a term of imprisonment.

They had been poor in those days, the Garthornes, grindingly poor, but when he came out of prison, it was to find that his wife had become suddenly rich through some inheritance that might have given him, I thought, an excuse for leaving her; though it certainly gave her none for refusing to see him again. Truly she must have been an abominable woman; even when all allowance is made for my immense personal prejudice against her. It is true that she offered him money, but he refused to take it, and went off to South America, taking little more than the violin which, hitherto the solace of his worst hours, was now to become his source of livelihood.

How he lived in those years is of no importance; what is of far more interest is that the little visionary should have built up for himself an ideal of the son he had hardly seen. That had been his chief compensa-

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tion, and one that Paula, as she grew up, had willingly shared. Between them, they had created the picture of the hero that should be Hugh Garthorne; a picture that had grown so vivid and convincing with the years, that it had at last drawn them home by way of Spain, earning their living on the road. And at San Sebastian they had found to their infinite relief that the journey they were planning to England might not be necessary. He had seen an English paper, published in Paris, giving the list of visitors at Biarritz and his belief that the Mrs. Garthorne there mentioned was his own wife had been confirmed three days after his arrival by a sight of her in the street. She had even glanced at him, but without the least recognition. The years had changed him more than her.

‘So you’ll understand,’ he concluded, ‘what it would mean to us just to speak to him. And you can trust us never to let him know. God forbid that I should do anything more to spoil his life.’

He seemed to have never a doubt that Hugh was in very truth the splendid hero of his father’s dream. Hugh! The youngster whom I had known until less than a week ago, as nothing more than an idle, overdressed, game-playing young waster!

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘the best thing that ever happened to Hugh was when he fell in love with your adopted daughter.’

He gasped as if I had thrown cold water over him. ‘With Paula!’ he ejaculated. ‘But, then . . .’

I saw the threat of flight in his eyes, and knew that he would utterly sacrifice himself and Paula, too, rather than risk the shadow of harm to his ideal.

‘No; but listen,’ I interrupted him, and gave him a

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succinct account of all that I had seen and hoped for in Hugh since our meeting on the rock four days earlier, together with a hint of what he had been before that time.

Even then, he was not to be convinced all at once. He had been so poor all his life, and the possession of money to him loomed so vastly important. Not until I insisted on the necessity of getting Hugh away from his mother, did the little man show signs of conviction. It was an argument that seemed to weigh with him, and I left him wondering if it were possible that his wife had been privy to his fraud before he had committed it, and had turned against him afterwards. I believed her capable even of that infamy.

When I got in I sent a messenger from my hotel with a note to Hugh, saying no more than that I wished to see him. He turned up after dinner, looking, I thought, a trifle weary.

‘Well, how goes it?’ I asked him.

‘I’m sticking it,’ he said; ‘but it’s going to be a long job. I wish I could see Paula again. Did you do what I asked you?’

‘And more! Oh! Very much more,’ I said.

Watching him carefully as I told him Gonzalez’s story—something too deliberately, perhaps, and withholding the essential statement until Hugh was on the verge of guessing it for himself—I could trace in him so clearly the two almost incompatible strains he had inherited. But while I admired the evidences of sympathy, understanding, idealism he had inherited from his father, I knew that they would constitute an almost insuperable handicap in the fight he had undertaken with his mother. *He* might be tempted to see her point of view. *She* would be absolute.

‘But, good Lord, I say,’ he murmured when the truth was out. ‘What had I better do, now?’

It was the paternal strain that, at first, made him unwilling to take my advice.

Perhaps I was hardly justified in my proposition. That insulting dismissal of me as a person quite unworthy of the least consideration still rankled; and I may be accused of a paltry wish for revenge—more particularly as there seems to be no real justification for my taking part in the interview I insisted upon between Mrs. Garthorne, her husband and Hugh. My excuse was that I went to support Gonzalez, as I may still call him, and he certainly needed a power of stiffening. But in the end both he and his son consented to my plan chiefly for Paula’s sake.

She, dear child that she was, remained in ignorance still of the fact that Hugh had fallen in love with her; but she was all alight with eagerness not only herself to meet the ideal hero of their dreams, but also at the possibility that her foster-father might be forgiven and allowed free communication with his son—a pardonable deception. I do not reproach myself for that.

We had to await Mrs. Garthorne in her drawing room. Hugh had given her no warning that she was to meet the supposed father of the girl he was in love with, knowing that she would simply and blankly refuse to see him. But no doubt she suspected some ambush, for she kept us waiting long enough to aggravate almost unendurably our natural nervousness.

When she came at last, however, she made a mistake in her pretence of completely overlooking me. That put me on my metal.

‘Who is this, Hugh?’ were her first words, indi-

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cating Gonzalez. She had closed the door behind her, but remained standing before it, dominating the room.

'This,' I said, 'is Mr. Gonzalez—it is not his real name—the adopted father of the charming young lady your son proposes to marry.'

'And what have you to do with the affair, may I ask, Mr. Edwardes?' she enquired, fixing me with her bitter stare.

'That would take too long to explain,' I said, 'more particularly as there is a far more important explanation to be made. Is it really possible, Mrs. Garthorne, that you do not recognise—er—Mr. *Gonzalez*?' I underlined the name with a peculiar emphasis.

Her stare travelled almost indolently from me to her husband, and rested there with a calm scrutiny.

'You see, Helen,' he began; and I fancy it was the phrase and the manner that enlightened her rather than her memory of his face.

Her self-possession was almost incredible. Her strength lay in the fact that she could be neither shocked nor wounded. She turned to her son, and said without a tremor: 'You know that your father has served a sentence of twelve months imprisonment for forgery?'

'But good God, mater, that was more than twenty years ago,' Hugh returned indignantly. I was glad to note his warmth.

And then—just for a moment, I caught the least flicker of her eyes in the direction of her husband, a glance that held the hint of a question, a doubt. And although I have no other evidence, for Gonzalez has preserved his faithful silence, I would swear that she had been accessory to his fraud and was debating how

THE INDOMITABLE MRS. GARTHORNE
far she could trust him to reserve that damning fact.

Apparently she was satisfied of his trustworthiness, for she continued with the same effect of inviolable calm: 'And what do you hope to gain by this most unseemly revival of forgotten scandals, Hugh? Are you trying to blackmail me into consenting to your marriage with this trumpery little violinist, picked up Heaven knows where by an ex-convict? You have tried, quite unsuccessfully, to bully me for a week. Is it to be blackmail, now? If so, I can assure you, that you will find that method equally unavailing.'

She had neither humour nor imagination. If she had combined intelligence with that colossal resolution of hers she might have been great. But she was essentially a stupid woman, or she would have known that her one chance with Hugh was to make an appeal to his sympathy, his gratitude. As it was, she stung him into open revolt.

'There's no question of blackmail,' he said, and there was something very like hate in his eyes, as he spoke. 'I have done my level best to persuade you, and I hoped this might help. Now, I tell you straight out, that I'm going to marry Paula, if she'll have me, with your consent or without it.'

'And what do you propose to live upon?' she retorted. 'Your wife's earnings?'

'Great Scott, no,' Hugh said. 'I'll make a living somehow. And, as Edwardes says, that'll be jolly well the best thing that could happen to me.'

She was incapable of understanding that. She sneered. She believed that his education had been too carefully neglected to permit of his earning his own living. And it was on that she counted for her ulti-

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mate triumph. 'I cannot prevent you,' she said, 'but look to me for no help, Hugh; until you come back—*alone.*'

It was her last word. With that she turned and left us, to all appearances as unruffled as fate itself. No doubt she was supremely confident that time would win the battle for her; that after three, six months, a year or two at most, Hugh would return, alone and defeated, to submit himself finally to her intolerable yoke. She could not believe that he would stand the test of poverty. Had she not suffered it, herself?

And if I can judge by the sight I had of her a few days ago, she still awaits her son's return in perfect confidence. She was driving in the Park, massive and imperturbable as ever, not a thread of white in her hair or an added line on her face.

And thinking at that moment of Hugh's joy in his wife and his little son, of the success he was already making for himself, and of how he had, almost miraculously, fulfilled the dreams of those two dear people who had come across the world merely for a sight of their fairy hero; thinking also, perhaps, that I had, after all, secretly accomplished my revenge and that she must know it, I lifted my hat and bowed to her.

Her glance travelled past me. She made no movement. But on her lips and in her attitude, I read again the signal of her insulting 'Faugh!'

Terrible, indomitable woman!

THE SUMMARY



THE Last Judgment had not followed the course anticipated by Mr. Exeley. It had become apparent very early in the proceedings that a majority, quite an overwhelming majority, of mankind could not be instantly assigned to one of those two classes that he still thought of in gentle pastoral metaphor as the sheep and the goats. And among the great body of indeterminates were many members of his own craft. Not all the authors had been put back for further trial. Some of them had been despatched at once to their appropriate destinations. But Mr. Exeley and a few thousand other novelists, not a dozen of whom were known to him by sight, had been sent off in the charge of various minor officials to write—so the Judge had given his direction—the whole truth so far as it was known to them.

Mr. Exeley sat down to his task without any particular qualms. He had always thought that it might be amusing to write an autobiography one day, if only as a relaxation from the necessity for telling a story. But when he had begun appropriately 'I was born', and had filled in the date and place of his birth, he suffered a slight check. Ought he to give any details of his ancestry, or of his family? Some of the latter were, no doubt, in this same condition of suspense, and the things he wrote about them might be prejudicial either to them or to himself. He had not seen any of them

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about, but for all he knew they might be writing autobiographies too.

Ought he, perhaps, to confine himself to facts, to a kind of elaborated notice in the manner of *Who's Who*? But the original direction had seemed quite clear to him when he heard it—'the whole truth so far as it was known to him'. Facts could not comprise the whole truth. There were his thoughts, for instance. It seemed to him that he had had an altogether unreasonable number of thoughts—very few of which he wanted to put down on paper. It began to look as if this task that had been set him was going to be uncommonly difficult—and complicated.

Mr. Exeley sucked the end of his pen and looked up at the minor official who—the phrase came automatically—was 'taking the class'.

He was reading, lolling back on his clouds in what looked a rather uncomfortable attitude, with crossed legs and humped shoulders. His robe was all pulled askew, his nimbus distinctly battered and at the present moment cocked over his right eye, his beard needed trimming, and the plumage of his left wing was all anyhow. If he had not been some kind of archangel, he might almost have been an Oxford man, Mr. Exeley thought.

The official looked up and caught Mr. Exeley's eye.

'Any difficulties?' he asked.

'Many,' Mr. Exeley confessed, 'In fact I've no notion how to begin.'

The official smothered a yawn and partly closed his book, marking his place with one inserted finger.

'For instance?' he inquired.

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'For instance in this matter of telling the whole truth,' Mr. Exeley began.

'So far as it is known to you,' the official amended.

'Of course, yes,' Mr. Exeley agreed. 'Well, am I expected to put down all the thoughts that I can remember? I can remember quite a lot.'

'If they are apposite to your theme.'

'Take rather a long time,' Mr. Exeley commented.

'No need to consider that,' the official reminded him. 'You have eternity before you.'

'I'm afraid they will make dull and often unpleasant reading,' Mr. Exeley confessed.

'Is that why you kept them out of your novels?' the official asked.

Mr. Exeley's eyebrows went up. 'Have you read my novels?'

'Naturally,' was the reply, given without the least effect of pride. 'I have read everything that was ever written in any language on the particular planet you come from. That was a necessary qualification for my present post.'

Mr. Exeley stared in dumb amazement. He had always had a great respect for scholarship, though he lacked it himself; and in the presence of such unprecedented learning he was paralysed with humility.

'Everything!' he murmured. 'In any language!'

'A comparatively trivial undertaking, of course,' the archangel continued, apparently unaware of his pupil's astonishment. 'But now that your planet has ceased to produce written matter, I am qualifying for a higher post.' He glanced down at the work in his hand, and smiled apologetically as he added, 'Some of this stuff is really a little difficult.'

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Mr. Exeley tried hard to look intelligent.

'It comes from a planet in the α Centauri system,' the archangel continued. 'You remember α Centauri? It was quite near you, as distances go; less than one and a half parsecs. However, the point is that the people there are one dimension ahead of you in every respect and their language is therefore in three dimensions instead of your two.'

'That must be dreadfully confusing,' Mr. Exeley said, attempting, without any success, to picture a three-dimensional language by thinking of the solid letters that he had played with in his nursery.

'A little, at first,' the archangel admitted. 'But it has the great advantage of giving extension in both space and time. Their words for "time", for example'—and he made a sound that Mr. Exeley could not spell, a sound that reminded him of the murmur of running water in that agreeable world he had so lately left—'expresses much more than duration. The verbs derived from it are susceptible of 109 inflexions, some of them indicating movement in one direction, others of a movement at right angles to it; and a few'—he smiled engagingly, and made a vague thrusting gesture with his left hand—'at right angles again to both the former directions. Very interesting. But I am interrupting you.'

'Not at all,' Mr. Exeley said.

'What you have to do, you know,' the archangel gently advised him, 'is to put down, as honestly as you can, everything that you have thought and said and done in the course of your earth-life, which has any bearing on the subject of truth. Quite a simple matter.'

'Yes,' Mr. Exeley agreed doubtfully.

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'I may tell you,' the archangel continued, 'that the strict sequence of events is of no importance whatever.'

'I see,' Mr. Exeley said. 'Yes, that might help.'

The archangel nodded in a friendly way and returned to his book.

Mr. Exeley continued to suck the end of his pen which was, of course, a quill. That brief conversation seemed noticeably to have changed his attitude towards the essay he had been told to write. His life on earth, that had appeared so important when he had come fresh from the Judgment Seat, now had an effect of being little and far away. He could think of nothing worthy of record. And if the historical sequence of events did not matter, where were you, as a novelist?

It was true that one did sometimes start with the event and then work back to explain it. Conrad had been rather fond of that back-stitch method. But, hang it all, if the narrative did flutter about in time, taking a peck here and there from different angles at the sequence of events, one always paid proper respect to the theory of causation. Indeed some of the liberties one took with the chronological order of events, were due to the necessity for explaining how the event had come about, for providing an acceptable theory of causation, in fact.

'Unless, of course, you move with a speed greater than that of light,' murmured the archangel without looking up from his book, 'in which case the order of events would be reversed.'

Mr. Exeley took his pen out of his mouth and stared at the almost blank sheet of paper before him. He had not a mathematical mind and statements such as that he

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had just heard conveyed no meaning to him. 'This is hell,' he said.

'Say purgatory, rather,' suggested the archangel, still intent on his reading. 'A better metaphor since it conveys the idea of progression.'

'But progression implies also causation,' protested Mr. Exeley.

The archangel looked up, marking his place as before. 'Not if the direction is changed,' he explained gently. 'Here, for instance, you are moving at right angles to your earth life.'

Mr. Exeley had an inspiration. 'Then in that case, my view of it would be foreshortened,' he said.

'Exactly,' replied the archangel, 'now try and write of that foreshortened aspect.'

But the more Mr. Exeley tried, the harder his task seemed to become. As an experiment he crossed out what he had already written and began with his death. And what had happened immediately before that? He had been ill, of course. And then? He found his thought journeying swiftly backwards along what appeared to him, now, as a strangely uneventful life. He saw himself, his wife and his children growing younger until they dropped out of his history one by one. He saw his novels come unwritten, printed books turning into typescript, into his own handwriting, finally into a few stray ideas that faded as the vapour of a breath fades in the still, cold air. He saw himself growing smaller and smaller till he reached that other critical date he had first entered. And before, or after that? Well, curiously enough, before, or after that, he saw himself again precisely as he was at the present moment.

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No, it was true, there really did not seem to be any difference, from his present point of view, in which direction he saw the story of his life.

He took up his pen and wrote boldly: 'I was born, or died, on the 1st of January, 1860, and died, or was born, on the 31st of December, sixty years later, or earlier.' Then he got up and proffered his essay to the archangel.

The archangel stretched out his hand mechanically, took the paper, glanced at it and filed it, untidily, with a heap of similar documents.

'You have found nothing to say of the period between these dates?' he asked.

'Nothing apposite to the subject set me,' replied Mr. Exeley.

'You learnt nothing?'

'Nothing that now seems to me worth putting down.'

'Very well, you may go,' said the archangel.

'Where to?' asked Mr. Exeley.

The archangel shrugged his shoulders.

CONCLUSION

A few words of advice to the English writer of Short Stories.



THERE was a period during which I was quite sure that I knew how to write short stories that would be accepted by one of the popular American magazines. That period began six years ago. I had had two stories taken one after the other by the Hearst group, which includes *The Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Hearst's International*; and as I was that year publishing a collection of earlier magazine stories (*The Imperturbable Duchess*), I sat down and wrote an introduction to it, generously giving away all the secrets I knew, and telling my fellow authors how the thing was done. I have just re-read that introduction, and it still seems to me that it contains some excellent advice. But I have one more, very important qualification to add, which is that although I am as sure now as I was in 1923, how the thing can be done, I cannot even with that knowledge always do it.

This may appear to be, but is not, a truism. I admit that in a sense we know how the stories of de Maupassant and Chekhov are made. Anyone of intelligence can study their construction, imitate their methods, find perhaps, more or less similar material, and yet be quite unable to produce such a story as

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Boule de Suif. But I would point out in the first place that neither a de Maupassant nor a Chekhov could make a living to-day by writing for the popular American magazines; and that the equipment necessary for the attainment of this ambition by the young aspirant does not include genius. He will do better without it.

The most obvious reason for this is that genius submits itself only with difficulty to a stereotyped form. Sherwood Anderson, for example, has thrown all the magazine conventions of short story writing to the winds; and if he had been an Englishman, no important American periodical—by which I mean none with a circulation of over a million—would have looked at him. He succeeded because he was an American, and they were proud of him; but to imitate his method would be fatal.

My immediate concern, then, is to underline the fact that the qualifications imposed by the American magazine market do not include genius, and that it is therefore presumably within the power of any reasonably practised writer to turn out now and again a seven thousand word short story that will bring him in at least a hundred and fifty pounds. It may be impossible to imitate de Maupassant; it is by no means impossible to adapt material to certain conventional forms demanded by American editors.

To illustrate one of these demands, I will take de Maupassant's *Boule de Suif*, and try to show why—apart from the subject which would have barred it in any case—that masterpiece would have been turned down by the editor of a three-million-circulation American magazine.

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As a story it starts well enough, and if some of the earlier description of French conditions in '71, and other unnecessary detail were cut, the opening would do. It would be well to get our passengers into the diligence with as little waste of time as possible, and reduce our indications of character to a minimum. All that is wanted in this connection is to place the characters quickly and unmistakably in recognisable categories. They belong to the respectable bourgeoisie, and quite small differentiations are enough to distinguish them one from another. Let us in any case get to the Inn as soon as possible, and display the essential crux.

As to that crux, it is evident that more could be made of it. The patriotic motive of Boule's refusal to entertain the German officer should be emphasised, also the self-seeking of her own compatriots. And this should be done by introducing more action in place of the innuendo that de Maupassant uses. What is needed is a greater tensivity of situation. We have that great essential of suspense, that can so often be defined by the question, 'Will she or won't she?' and that other essential for the better stories in this kind, the uncertainty as to the means of the disentanglement. For although the sophisticated reader may guess correctly every time that the heroine will descend from the fence without shame on the hither side, he must never be allowed any certainty as to *how* the lady will get down. Also the tensivity of the situation ought steadily to increase until the climax is reached, after which with the lady on safe ground again, the story should be closed as quickly as possible. Any side issues that remain should be dealt with in brief

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dramatic sentences. There must be no detached explanations after the event.

Wherefore we see that the remainder of de Maupassant's story of *Boule de Suif* will not do at all. Apart altogether from the fact that she gets down on the wrong side from a Middle West point of view, all those reactions of the other passengers the next day would be hopelessly in the nature of anti-climax. If I were the editor of one of the magazines I have indicated, I should probably say to my sub: 'Who is this Guy? Ever heard of him? Well, he can write, but it's all the wrong stuff, and he's got no more idea of construction. . . .' And if I were going to attempt a new version of *Boule de Suif*, I should make her virtuous to begin with, keep her virtuous throughout, and omit all those peculiar values that make the story as it was originally told, a work of genius.

That point of virtue for heroines by the way, cannot be too firmly insisted upon, and I would strongly advise any young English author to avoid, as far as possible, any suggestion of sexual immorality, even among his minor characters. Such avoidance severely limits the number of plots, but no story that would, for example, be rejected over here by the editor of the *Girl's Own Paper* on the score of impropriety, will fetch a decent price in the United States.

The reason for this is fairly obvious. A magazine with ten or twenty million readers has to cater for an ideal average. It is less a question of attracting than one of not losing a particular public, and the editor will instantly reject any story that falls into certain categories—chief among which is sexual immorality. The general editor of the Hearst magazines once told me

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that he could never accept any story that dealt, however indirectly, with the subject of marital infidelity, but it is as well to recognise a far wider limitation than is imposed by this comparatively modest restriction. If English authors wish to make an income from American magazines, they must never for one instant forget that they are catering for, *inter alia*, New England readers and their ostensible objects must be to butter the doves, and *féliciter le bourgeois* on being what he believes himself to be. There must in any case be no fluttering or astonishing so far as sex is concerned.

This appears at first sight perhaps to be a horribly severe limitation, but on the other side, we must remember that there are plenty of crimes which we can deal with quite freely. Any kind of financial swindle makes admirable material, and if the swindler is sufficiently ingenious and a man otherwise to be respected, we can permit him to 'get away with it'. Robbery and murder are not barred, nor certain forms of cruelty, and, broadly speaking, the general average of morality in America may be assumed as being recognisably lower than that of England in connection with offences of this kind. As a consequence of this we are not quite so tied in the matter of meting out poetic justice as when we are writing for the more popular magazines at home, and the weakening of this restriction means an increase in the number of possible plots.

Beyond this the deliberately sentimental story is always popular if it is well done. One of the best-paid items in the present collection 'The Meeting Place', is an instance of this type, and will also provide

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one or two further object lessons in construction. It will be noticed, for example, that even when the answer to the question, 'Will she or won't she?' is becoming fairly obvious, it is still uncertain what the heroine's reaction will be when she learns the hero's secret, so that his surprise is shared in some sort by the reader. Beyond that, mark the fact that the climax comes right at the end of the story. In the sentimental genre we are not working up to a dramatic situation so much as to a steady intensification of emotion, achieved in this case by a sudden flood of joy being poured upon the hero, and it is essential to leave him on the top note.

I tried the same theme again, reversing the sex of the two chief actors, in 'Laughter and Tears', a less successful essay, chiefly, I think, because the element of suspense breaks down rather too soon. It offers, nevertheless, an example of another trick that will sometimes make the fortune of a short story. This trick is the use of a phrase—the title in this case—or of some slight incident, that after being used to illustrate one motive throughout, is brought in again at the close with a new and preferably hitherto unsuspected meaning. Well done, this gives the final 'kick' that is rightly valued by editors for the reason that it leaves a sensation of enjoyment in the reader's mind. Even the most dramatic story may be ruined by a tame ending, and one of the most successful contributors to the American magazines told me that she never began a story until she had fully visualised and explored the possibilities of the climax. The last two or three paragraphs have the same relation to a short story that the peroration has to a speech. A man may be eloquent and effective for an hour on the platform, but if he ends

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weakly he will lose his full measure of applause, and the tame ending will be remembered when the rest of the speech is forgotten.

I admit, however, that it is not always possible to end on the top note. In 'The Hands of Serge David', which found favour with the editor of *The Cosmopolitan*, and has been twice reprinted elsewhere, the last sentence is one of promise rather than of achievement. It leaves, no doubt, a grateful sense of the 'happy ending' in the reader's mind, so that the final effect is one of pleasure, but there is no real 'kick' in it. The whole story, moreover, is anything but a model of construction, and succeeds chiefly by the interest and slight originality of the subject matter. Also it provides an instance of what may be done by persuading the reader to believe in the improbable, for as a rule the more improbable the subject, the better the story from a selling point of view: so long as the reader can be convinced that the thing either did or could happen.

The capacity for believing in the improbable and conveying that belief to their readers is the great gift of the romanticists, and the short story of the type I am discussing is fundamentally romantic in conception. (Among the magazine stories included in this volume there is none that approaches the realism of de Maupassant's *Boule de Suif*). The detail and conversations may be reasonably natural, but the necessity for catching and holding the reader's attention by the promise of a dramatic or emotional climax containing some element of surprise, almost precludes the direct representation of normal life. We must be able to believe that the chief situation might arise in certain circumstances, but it is not offered as typical of

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common experience. There are, it is true, a few American writers—Sherwood Anderson has already been mentioned, and the name of Dorothy Canfield might be added in this connection—who do write of life more or less as they see it, and are, nevertheless, favourites with American editors; but simple stories of English life will not do as well. It is not reasonable to expect that they should. Of those ten million readers addressed, the majority are not more interested in the uneventful detail of English life than the average suburban woman at home is in the description of life in the Middle West. Neither public is able to visualise the unfamiliar scene from a written description, and their attention wanders at once. The popular magazines are published to interest, not to instruct.

And it is for this reason, to return to the last sentence of my opening paragraph, that, knowing so well how these stories ought to be written, I yet fail so often in the writing. My own interest lags. I am apt to find exciting suggestions in the development of my characters and my natural tendency is to press these, to me, entertaining discoveries, and let the story go hang. It is such a bore to sit down and deliberately try to address the average man or woman. If I could do the thing easily and naturally, as probably the most successful exponents of this craft are able to do, I should be a happier man; but in my case, endless patience, consideration and rewriting are essential, and these magazine stories of mine represent immense labour. (The second half of 'Laughter and Tears' was completely rewritten four times before I was content to let it go).

As to the other items in this collection—the shorter

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interpolated pieces added to season the more solid fare and make it, I hope, less indigestible—they have all been written to indulge my own taste. They are in many moods, sombre, satirical, merely light-hearted, and as I wrote them for my own pleasure, I must not complain because they were ill-paid. Indeed, one of them, and that perhaps the wisest, 'The Man who Hated Flies', finds publication here for the first time.

J. D. BERESFORD

Ickleford Rectory,

Hitchin, 1929





